

ぼくらの

alternative

著: 大樹連司
原作・イラスト: 鬼頭莫宏

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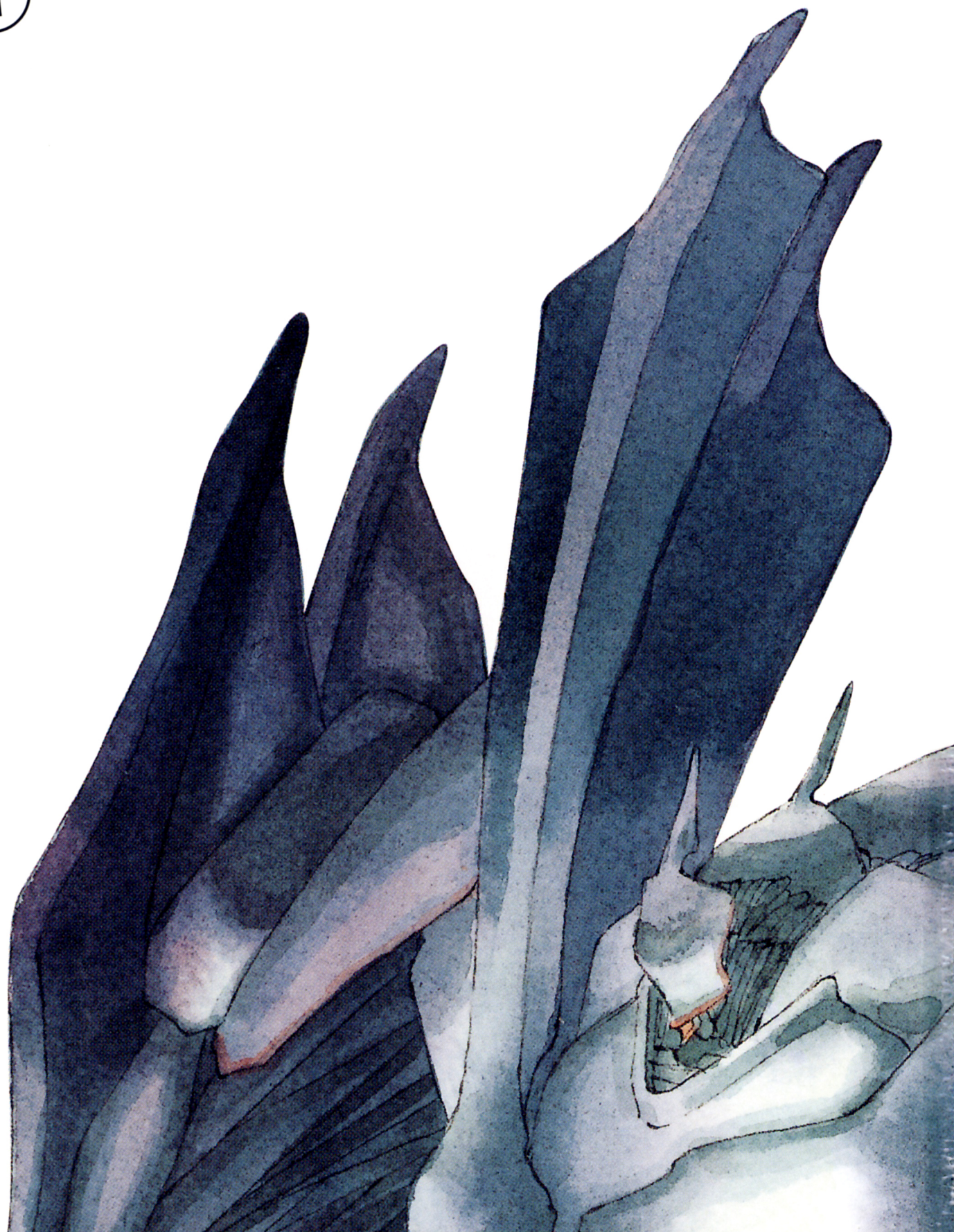
GAGAGA

ぼくらの

alternative

Written by Renji Ooki Original Concept/Illustration by Mohiro Kitoh

1



吉川寛治

Yoshikawa Kanji

Nickname: Kanji

中学1年 1st Year Junior High

160センチ

160cm

O型

Type O

宇白順

Ushiro Jun

Nickname: Ushiro

中学1年 1st Year Junior High

150センチ

150cm

A型

Type A

加古功

Kako Isao

Nickname: Kako

中学1年 1st Year Junior High

150センチ

150cm

B型

Type B



和久隆

Waku Takashi

Nickname: Waku

中学1年 1st Year Junior High

155センチ

155cm

B型

Type B

小高勝

Kodaka Masaru

Nickname: Kodama

中学1年 1st Year Junior High

145センチ

145cm

O型

Type O

切江洋介

Kirie Yousuke

Nickname: Kirie

中学1年 1st Year Junior High

140センチ

140cm

A型

Type A



大公開! これが15人(+1人?)の仲間たちだ!

阿野摩子

Ano Mako

Nickname: Mako

中学1年 1st Year Junior High

150センチ

150cm

A型

Type A

宇白可奈

Ushiro Kana

Nickname: Kana

小学4年 4th Year Primary

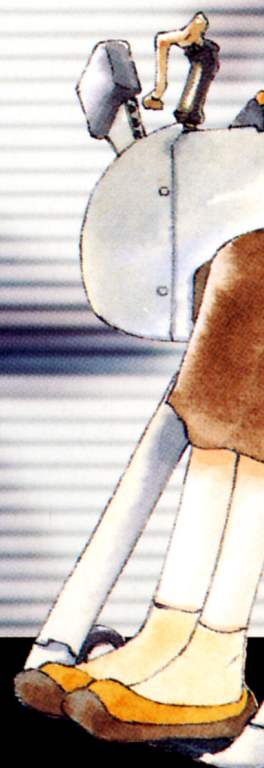
130センチ

130cm

O型

Type O

宇白順の妹 Ushiro Jun's Sister



倉坂梢

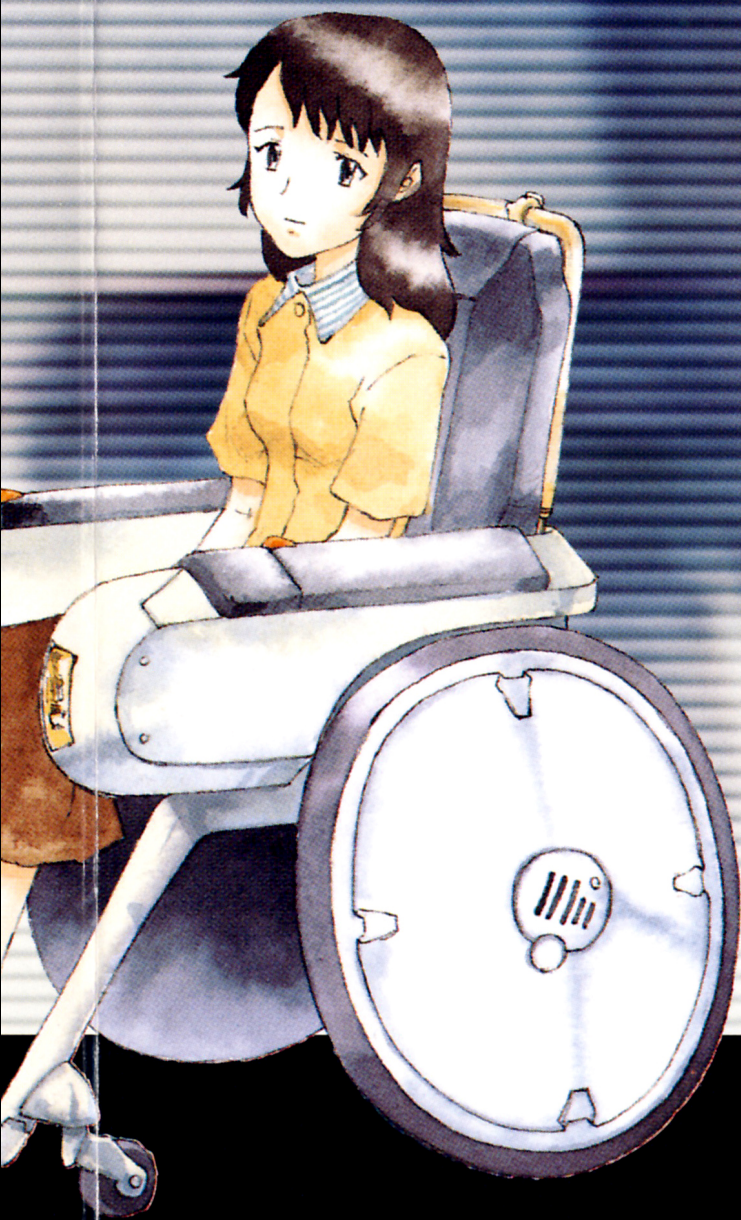
Kurasaka Kozue

Nickname: Kozue

中学1年 1st Year Junior High

145センチ 145cm

B型 Type B



一之瀬マリア

Ichinose Maria

Nickname: Maria

中学1年 1st Year Junior High

160センチ 160cm

O型 Type O



榎島摩耶子

Makishima Mayako

Nickname: Maaya

???

150センチ 150cm

A型 Type A



古茂田孝美

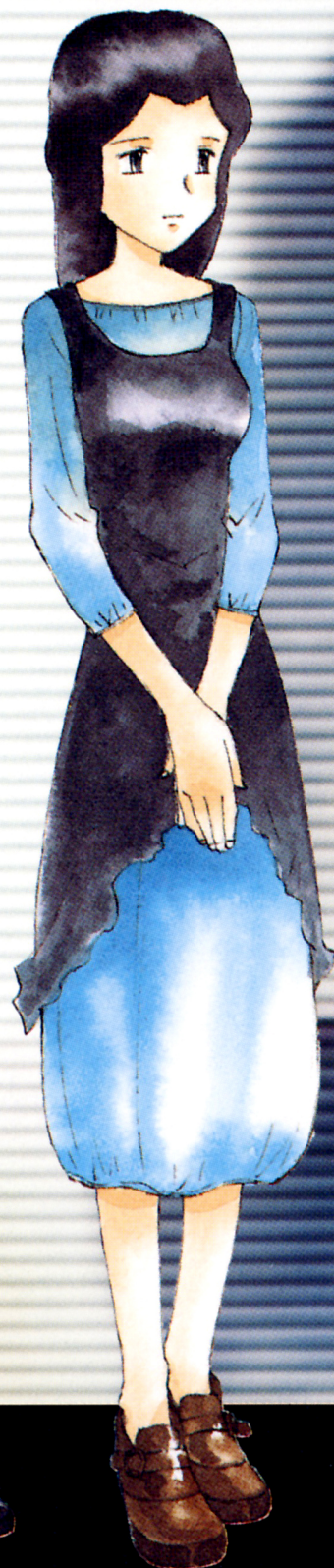
Komoda Takami

Nickname: Komo

中学1年 1st Year Junior High

155センチ 155cm

A型 Type A



柊つばさ

Hiragi Tsubasa

Nickname: Tsubasa

中学1年 1st Year Junior High

147センチ 147cm

AB型 Type AB

本田千鶴

Honda Chizuru

Nickname: Chizu

中学1年 1st Year Junior High

150センチ 150cm

AB型 Type AB

往住愛子

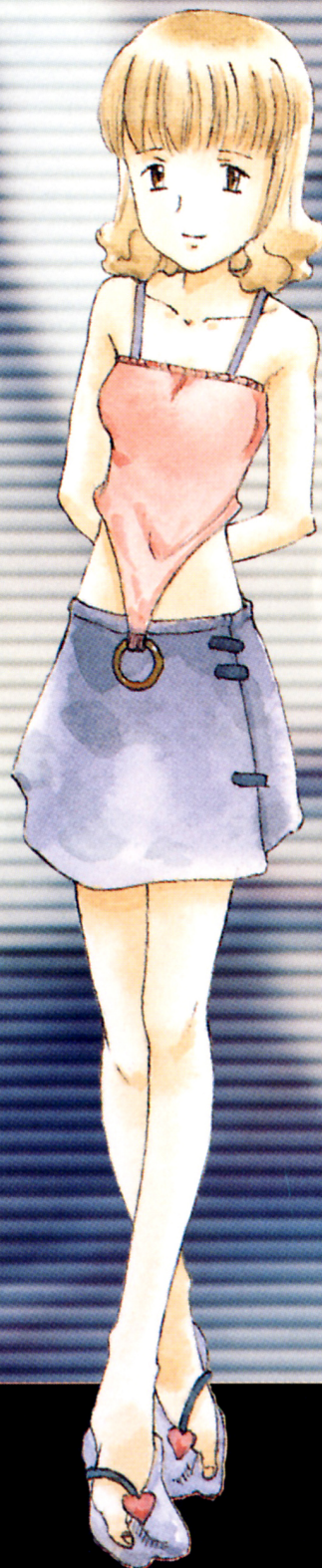
Tokosumi Aiko

Nickname: Anko

中学1年 1st Year Junior High

150センチ 150cm

B型 Type B



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Note: Page numbering follows the original Japanese novel print format, not English format.

Bokurano: Alternative

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This novel translation is formatted for 2-page view in a PDF reader (specifically Adobe Acrobat Reader), and can best be enjoyed as such. For the most part, names are in Western order (Given Name, Family Name). Illustrations appear in-line with the points at which they appear in the book.

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Prologue

The year we started junior high, we considered ourselves all grown up. We thought we could do anything. We laughed, we cried, we got angry... We thought we knew all there was to life. But in reality, we were just kids, sheltered by our parents and by society. We'd never experienced true sadness, joy, or anger. We found that out when the fifteen of us got together... and when we met *It*.

It all started on that summer day. It was a scene that could have been anywhere — a dozen or so middle school students playing around on the seashore under the pretext of '*observing nature*'. We were told by our parents that "It's summer break! Don't waste it playing games in the house. Go out and see some nature." That's pretty much how the 14 of us ended up getting sent out there.

Some of us grabbed things like nets and waded into the sea up to our knees to catch crabs, while some took notes seriously. There were, of course, the guys who tossed crabs at the girls to make them scream. That's the sort of typical summer scene it was.

The only slightly unusual thing about that summer was that it took place on an island separated from the mainland by a full day's ride on the regular ferry. Until we met *It*, we really were just ordinary kids. In this country. You could probably find countless kids like us spending their summer breaks in a similar fashion. And there are probably also many kids like us in other countries, living out their own happy and carefree memories. Or maybe there were also countless kids like us who were forever deprived of their chance to enjoy happiness by circumstances

none of us could possibly have imagined at the time, and who were laid low with despair.

There are 10 billion people living on our world, and none of us amounted to more than one in 10 billion of the whole. Each of us certainly believed that we were something special. Each of us was living our own lives with our own worries.

Us...

Waku — Takashi Waku,

Kozue — Kozue Kurasaka,

Kako — Isao Kako,

Kirie — Yosuke Kirie,

Tsubasa — Tsubasa Hiiragi,

Chizu — Chizuru Honda,

Mako — Mako Ano,

Kodama — Masaru Kodaka,

Komo — Takami Komoda,

Anko — Aiko Tokosumi,

Maria — Maria Ichinose,

Kanji — Kanji Yoshikawa,

Ushiro — Jun Ushiro,

Kana — Kana Ushiro.

These were the 14 in our group.

However, we were each but one in 10 billion. Only 14 among 10 billion, we really were just normal kids, with the ordinary, petty worries that

normal kids have. There was absolutely *nothing* that was particularly special about us.

There was no particular reason why we should have the right or duty to represent the entire world's 10 billion inhabitants.

So ... why then? Why were we chosen? And why did *She* choose us?

She. Who was it that discovered *Her* first? It was something that could never be seen on the mainland, poised between the emerald-green sky and sea, the world was bleached white by the overpowering brightness of the sun as it rose to the middle of the sky. Since when had *She* been there? It was as if the midsummer atmosphere had been sliced open at precisely that spot, or as if a gloomy, gaping hole had opened up in the earth. And there stood a young girl. Despite the sweltering midsummer heat, she was dressed in a black gown. It was all too sudden and all too strange. Who was the first to speak to her, and what did they say?

It could have been anyone, and they could have said anything. It's certain that it was just talking to make conversation — something with no real content, like, "Are you from around here?"

Regardless, although we did feel a little uneasy about her all-black appearance. At the time, she was still very much a part of our ordinary world.

It should have been an unremarkable situation; a familiar story in which children going to a seaside school on an island and get to know a local kid. They become friends in the course of their conversations, then keep up later on by writing each other regularly. It's the kind of thing that could

happen anywhere, and there should have been nothing more to it than that.

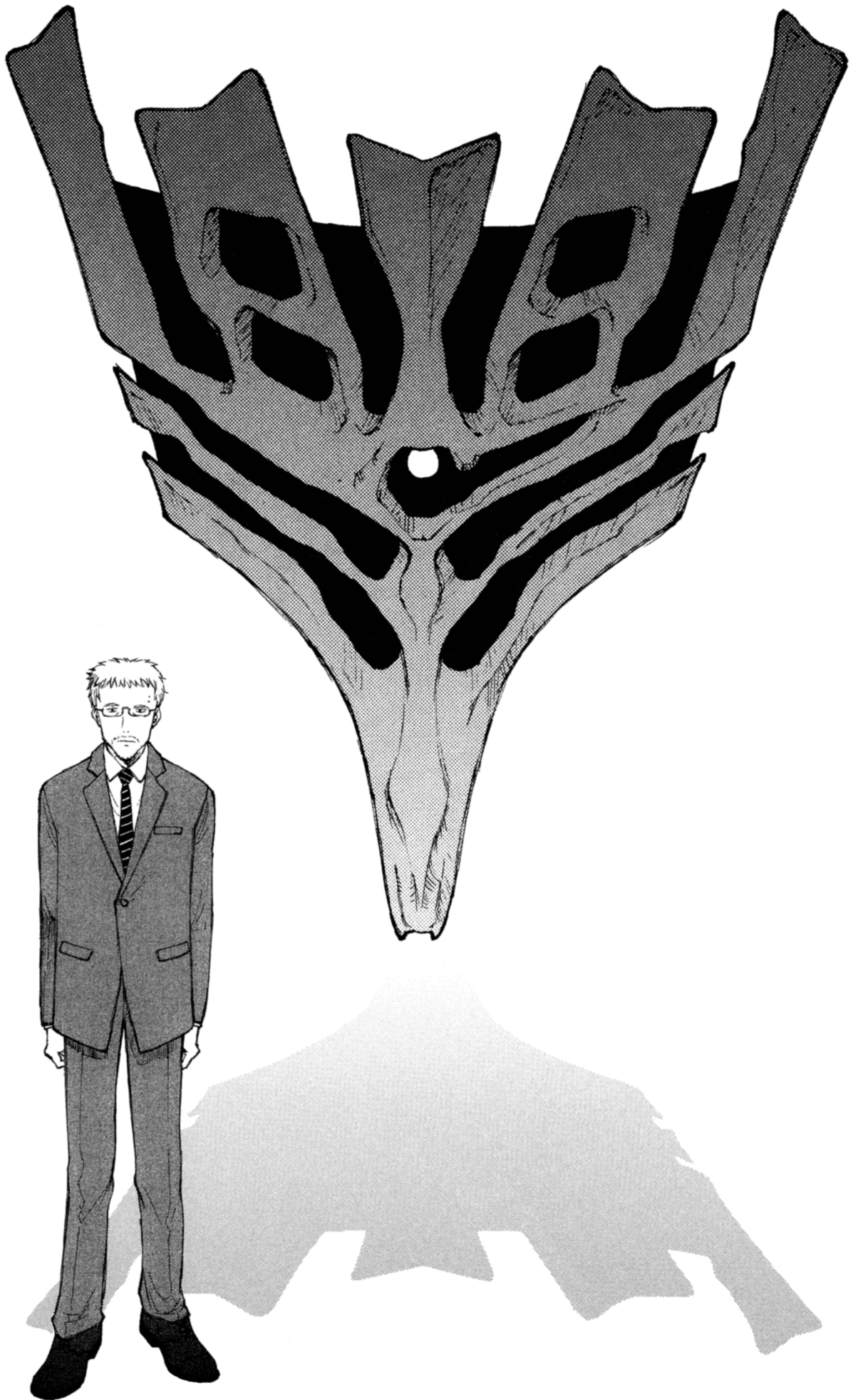
But she didn't answer any of our questions. Instead, she turned toward us with a face with features more refined than an amateur pop star, and looked each one of us up and down as though sizing us up. She had a remarkably grown-up expression for someone who appeared to be about the same age as us. Grown up. Or maybe cold is more like it — cold and hard. She seemed to have discarded her emotions somewhere. The impression I got was that of someone who had been stripped of all feeling by a harsh, cruel reality. Despite it being summer, a chill went up my spine. Her gaze stopped. Her eyes fixed on me.

She looked at me, nodded, and then smiled. She had dimples when she smiled, and from her faint smile, all the initial coldness melted away. But that made it all the more terrifying. That was the moment. The moment that our world became unhinged. This is what she said:

“Hey guys. How would you like to try saving the world?”

It felt as if we were daydreaming. This young girl dressed up in black like a witch under a scorching midsummer sun, inviting us to ‘save the world’. The tale that started that day has certainly been dreamlike — the imperiled green earth, the fifteen attacking enemies, and us, going out to meet them.

It's a fantastic tale, and it is our story.



Waku would always remember those words.

The first words she said.

There were thirteen of them in the first year of middle school and one in the final year of elementary school. Waku and the others were taking part in an Interactive Learning Nature School on an island. All kinds of sightseeing activities were available, making it a little like a school trip to the seaside. The trip south from the mainland took two days on a large ferry. The island was a perfect place to make summer memories, from swimming in the sea to a whole host of nature activities, not that the island was that large. As the two week program drew to a close there was just time to fit in a few less academic activities such as sightseeing and whale watching.

On that day they amused themselves splashing around in the sea, all in the name of nature observation. While they thought of themselves as full grown adults, the middle schoolers still had a little childishness left in them. With everything they had been through over the two weeks, even the most mature of them was exhausted.

Being allowed to spend time on a nearby beach was a well-deserved break. It seemed all the more enjoyable because it felt somewhat like skipping the official schedule. Even those who were a little awkward at the idea of spending two weeks with strangers their own age were starting to open themselves to others.

“Are you sure you don’t want to join in, Waku-kun?”

“No way. You don’t do nature walks in middle school. We’re past all that.”

Waku tried to put on the air of an adult, but in doing so made himself seem all the more childish. The two children were resting under the shade of a tree a little away from the shore. Kozue sat in her motorized wheelchair with Waku alongside as they watched the others.

But Kozue knew the truth. Waku was worried that Kozue couldn't join in playing in the sea with the others.

They observed the scene.

"Wow! I've never seen a hermit crab before!" exclaimed Anko, a city girl.

"It looks like it'd be the first to go in a big earthquake," mocked Kanji.

Next to them Kako made an obvious approach towards Chizu, which was easily avoided, and between them stood Kirie, desperately trying to mediate the splashing contest.

The only ones taking the nature observation activity seriously were Komo, Mako and Kodama. Mako was scooping up fish from the sea, while Kodama looked them up on his pocket dictionary and Komo entered them in a notebook. It looked as though Kodama got involved with Mako and Komo's serious efforts just to give him an excuse to use the gadget. The pocket dictionary he was fiddling with actually belonged to Mako. All mobile games had been confiscated on the first day of the school, so to Kodama the device was the closest thing to civilization left. Unlike its original owner, who was hopeless with technology, Kodama had quickly mastered the device.

"Maria! Don't go out so far. It's dangerous," someone shouted.

“It’s okay! It looks far but I’m a good swimmer. ‘A girl of the navy has to swim!’ as my dad always says,” came back Maria’s equally booming voice.

“You might be okay but what about Kana-chan?”

“It’s okay! A true mother has faith enough to throw her child into the abyss. I want her to see the world!”

“It’s not okay! She doesn’t have to see that much!”

Kana, the elementary schooler, was riding piggyback on her shoulders as Maria plunged on into the open sea. Maria was half African American, half Japanese. Her lively personality drove her onwards despite her shorts already being soaked through. Kana, riding aloft, seemed naturally a little anxious, and Tsubasa was the one trying to get Maria to stop.

“Meh. Let her float away,” barked the person who should really have been looking after her, Ushiro, Kana’s older brother.

Almost two weeks had passed since the start of the Nature School. It already felt like they’d been there forever. Before long their time would come to an end.

The played out children stopped for a break. They sat in a circle in the shade of a tree and Mako, who had been appointed group leader, handed out snacks. Tsubasa and Komo passed around paper cups of barley tea.

That was when it happened.

When they met that girl.

Before anyone knew it, a girl was standing there.

She looks the same age as us, thought Waku.

The girl looked out of place. Even with the cool sea breeze the sun blazed a good 90 degrees heat. In the height of summer the girl was dressed in a jet black long-sleeved one-piece with black knee-length socks. Dressed like that she looked as though she might join Kozue and Komo and come close to collapse within five minutes, but before anyone knew it there she stood. Even her hair was jet black, her two plaits blowing in the sea breeze. Despite the scorching weather her skin stood out as a ghostly white, even whiter than Anko's, who refused to go out before she'd spent 30 minutes applying sun cream each day. She seemed disconnected from reality, as though she'd just appeared there from another land.

The girl didn't seem to be doing anything, and she didn't say anything. She was simply standing there, without anybody quite knowing how she got there.

But...

The group was suddenly spellbound by the girl, or rather, they were captivated by her unusual appearance, and the chatter stopped.

"Do you... live around here?" The silence was broken as Waku asked, taking charge.

The girl didn't answer, and simply surveyed the group.

She seemed composed, but her expression was distant and cold. Her eyes seemed to be evaluating the group, or maybe checking something.

And then, a single nod.

The girl said the words.

Waku would always remember them.

The girl said...

“So, you guys want to save the world?”

The girl’s voice was soft but Waku heard it clearly, like it called to his very soul.

But... save the world? She’s making some sort of joke...

So Waku answered, “Is it some sort of game?”

“Game?”

The girl gave a brief nod.

“Yes, a game. You’d be like the world’s only team of game players.”

“So, what sort of game is it?” asked Kodama, his eyes lighting up.

“It’s simple. Very simple. Fifteen giant enemies will attack this world. If the enemies aren’t defeated this Earth will end. But the enemies are very powerful. Only a giant robot would be able to resist them.”

“A robot?!”

“Yes.”

The girl spoke as though reciting a poem she’d sung a thousand times, speaking without pausing, distant from reality.

“Mass of blackness. Armor layered. Power devastating. Life unassailable. You... will be the pilots.”

There was a brief moment of silence.

“Wow. Sounds interesting,” said Waku.

“Indeed. And the others?”

Of course, Waku wasn’t the only one who was intrigued. Over the past two weeks at the Nature School they had all gradually gotten bored with the never-changing scene of the island. It wasn’t clear exactly what the girl was talking about, but it seemed like something exciting. And after all, aside from one, they were all in middle school now. They all knew the truth about Santa Claus, and knew things like giant robots and righteous heroes were confined to fiction in anime and manga.

So, the children imagined the girl’s offbeat tale must be some sort of eccentric event organized by one of the older children.

It’ll probably be a surprise of some sort to kick off a new recreational activity. The nature observation trip must have been a pretext to give them time to prepare. To be honest the way the girl introduced it was a little stiff, so corny. This whole setup is like something from elementary school.

In the end, the kind-hearted children decided it was some kind of event, and agreed to participate out of politeness, despite not really knowing what it was.

Perhaps all for similar reasons, the rest of the children agreed with Waku.

The girl seemed satisfied. "So, it's decided," she said, smiling.

I remember the smile especially.

But vaguely.

Waku's memory from there on was indistinct, or even non-existent.

We were definitely on the sun-drenched beach.

But before they knew it...

Before they knew it they were in an old wooden building. It was run down and smelled musky. Not only was it old, it had seemed to have been abandoned a long time ago. This was obvious from the thick layer of dust carpeting the floor. Every step left a print, like footprints in fresh snow. The dust whirled around like mist and Komo coughed a little. Piled up at the back of the main room was a mound of desks, giving the impression that it must once have been used as a school. The windows were boarded up so the outside wasn't visible.

The room was gloomy, but the electricity still worked. Decaying fluorescent lamps flickered on and off, and, looking completely out of place, several computer monitors cast their eerie glow into the dim room.

Did local kids bring computers here to play games? wondered Waku.

Is this room even on the island? We can't see outside and I don't remember seeing it on the map of the island. What route did we even take to get here? And who pushed Kozue's wheelchair?

Before Waku could express his concerns the girl began to speak. She stood on a platform and made her announcement in her usual grandiose manner.

"This is the room of the sacred contract; the room where it all begins."

As before the girl's delivery was over-dramatic and some of the boys laughed.

"Hey. This is important to build the atmosphere. There's going to be a fierce battle for the fate of the world. You have to prepare yourself seriously," said one of the girls, laughing back.

What's she talking about? wondered Waku. *What sort of cheesy game is this? With this build up it's going to be some boring, old-fashioned retro game.*

He looked around.

In contrast to the age of the building, the computers were brand new. They certainly looked more powerful than those in the IT room at Waku's school.

Kodama, who was more of an expert on these things, looked mystified and asked, "What brand are these? What OS do they run?" *New model I guess.*



However, the girl nimbly eluded Kodama's question, "So, all participants in the game must place their hand on a sacred slate and make a chosen hero's contract. Just touch it and say your name."

With that from somewhere she took out boards similar to a triangular baseball base and presented them to the children.

"What do you mean, contract?" But before Waku could finish his question Kako jumped forward to get first place.

"I'm number one! Kako Isao. Hah. Too slow."

"Ki... Kirie... Yosuke."

"Tokosumi Aiko!"

"Maria Ichinose."

I guess I'm in too.

"I'm Waku Takashi."

As he said his name and touched the slate, Waku felt a chill run up his spine. It had a strange texture, like metal but not metal; a sensation he'd never experienced before. After his own turn, Waku helped Kozue to the desk in her wheelchair. Over the course of the Nature School Waku had come to be the one who looked after Kozue's needs.

"Umm," Kozue started nervously. "I... I can't walk. Is that okay?"

"That's fine. As long as you have a stout heart and a love of this world, you're eligible to fight."

“Okay. Well, thank you.” Kozue raised her hand timidly, “Kurasaka Kozue.”

The other children followed suit.

“Hiiragi Tsubasa.”

“Honda Chizuru.”

“Kodaka Masaru.”

“Ano Mako.”

“Komoda Takami.”

“Yoshikawa Kanji.”

They continued without incident.

“U... Ushiro Kana.”

As the slightly younger Kana moved to touch the slate, her brother Ushiro slapped her hand away to stop her.

The room froze.

“You don’t have to do it.”

Kana silently pulled her hand back. It was obvious from Kana’s expression on the brink of tears that Ushiro had used too much force in stopping her.

“Why not let her? It’s silly just to leave one person out,” intervened Waku.

“Yeah. Kana wants to play too, right?” Tsubasa joined in, as she often did to help Kana, but Ushiro was adamant.

“It’s none of your business!”

“Hey!”

“Okay, come on.” Kanji tried to settle things down.

Whenever any kind of quarrel erupted during Nature School it was almost always Ushiro at the heart of it.

“I’m Kana’s guardian.”

It was indeed true that Kana, an elementary schooler, was only permitted to attend the Nature School if her brother Ushiro looked after her. But in reality Ushiro didn’t look after Kana at all. He left it to Tsubasa and Mako to watch over her. Not only that, Waku had heard from Tsubasa and Mako that he would often get angry and strike out at his sister.

“You’re saving your poor little sister from getting into a dangerous fight? You’re such a good brother,” commented Waku, thinking, *whatever way he takes that, so be it*.

“Games you either win or lose. If I’m playing I play to win. I don’t need her holding us back.”

The girls laughed, this time sarcastically.

“Okay, okay!”

A loud voice cut through the chaotic atmosphere.

It was Maria.

“This sort of thing is more fun if we all take part. It’s the big brother’s job to save his sister if she gets into trouble!”

Saying that, she lightly held up Kana’s arm, marched her to the desk and held her hand to the slate before Ushiro could do anything about it.

“Ah!” Kana exclaimed.

“Oh, didn’t you want to, Kana-chan?”

“No, I did. I want to play.”

“That’s okay then. Everyone together.”

Ushiro tried to appear disinterested, but he still made the ‘contract’.

“Ushiro Jun.”

“And that’s everyone,” Maria declared.

“Now we have a collection of fourteen combatants,” the girl said, clapping her hands together.

At that instant, by some sort of trick, the slate disappeared.

“Oh yeah,” Waku suddenly thought, “What’s your name?”

“My name? My name, yes, yes... Ma... ma... Makishima... Mayako. Makishima Mayako. You can call me Maaya.”

The girl's words somehow seemed choked.

"The contracts of the world saving heroes are complete. So, let's start the game. The enemy will be here quite soon."

"Eh?" Waku exclaimed in confusion. "Aren't we going to use these computers?"

Don't tell me we've got ourselves involved in some stupid game of tag or something. That'd be typical of this trip.

"No. We won't be using cheap little things like those. The game board is this world. You are the game pieces. The stake is the fate of the Earth. That's the game. Brace yourselves, okay? The fight has already started."

As she spoke the girl smiled sweetly. It was a look of satisfaction as though she had already won the game in that instant.

What sort of a game is that?

A slight feeling of dread came over Waku. Then, Waku's memories abruptly end.

Nature School came to a close without much ado. The sunburnt children filed onto the same large ferry to the mainland they'd use to get there, and began their journey home.

It was evening.

The ferry was fairly old and there were no amusement facilities available, so the bored children gathered in the corner of the third class dormitory room and passed the time with trivial topics. It was coming up to the last

weekday of the summer break, so there were few other passengers. The children were the only ones on the whole floor.

The topics of discussion were wide ranging.

The potato chunks in Waku's curry are way too big.

How did Anko survive all these years without knowing potatoes are poisonous raw?

Mako had a camping stove and cooking time had to be measured to the minute.

Before coming here almost all of the children were complete strangers, but after just two weeks together the roles of the funny ones and straight ones were already defined. As long as they didn't fall out of their roles their conversation could continue automatically without end.

"Shall we bet on it?"

"How would we do that? Who decides who won or lost?"

They had cheerfully divided the area into sleeping spaces but somehow forgot about Kako. Kanji was the one coldly rubbing Mako's idea of gambling for them.

Of course, to Waku it seemed that honor student Mako would use any excuse to avoid apologizing for the basic error, but then maybe Mako already knew that. Maybe embracing things like this and working through them was a sign the children were becoming adults.

That was a good summer break, thought Waku, thinking back over the past two weeks.

On the whale watching tour they had seen dolphins and even a sperm whale. It was almost the start of fall when they don't come to the surface so they had been really lucky. It looked about 20 meters long; it was simply enormous. Everything else too, the nature observation trips, campsite cooking, even the feeling of skipping lessons, they had truly enjoyed those two weeks. It had been a long time since Waku had a summer break like that. Up to now Waku's summers were packed with training.

But... Waku thought.

There was no reply. School would start again in September and there had still been no reply. If there had they could have met up already. Honestly it was probably already too late. He thought about the time he got mumps and was in bed for a week. Nothing for five months was too long.

"Waku, which one?" asked Kako.

The question broke into his rambling thoughts and startled him.

"What? Oh, sorry. I was just thinking."

"Thinking... that's not like you," joked Kako, making everyone laugh.

Inside, Waku was a little bit vexed about the comment.

I know I'm more of a physical than a mental type, but there's no need for that. Kako's the one not thinking enough, he grumbled.

"What were you talking about?"

"What was that old school house about? And that mysterious cute girl... was she for real? Doesn't anyone else wonder about that?" Kako asked, raising the tension.

I see. The mysterious 'cute' girl. She had a funny way of talking but... the mysterious girl... Makishima Mayako, wasn't it?

After everything they'd been through, the conversation seemed to end up at this topic. The mysterious phenomenon they encountered during their two weeks at Nature School. Waku and the others met the girl who called herself Makishima Mayako, who invited them to play a game 'to pilot a robot, fight enemies invading the Earth and save the world,' and took them to a run-down old building. There, the children placed their hands on a white slate and entered a 'contract' to play the game. All fourteen of them remembered it.

But...

When the group came to, they were sleeping in the shade of a tree on the beach. The old building and the girl were nowhere to be seen.

"It was a dream! We checked the map and there was no abandoned school. If that old building really existed someone on the island would've known about it, wouldn't they?" said Kanji.

It's true. We asked the islanders and there is no old school on the island.

But Waku clearly remembered it.

The girl took us there... to the old building. It was run-down and smelled musty. The flickering fluorescent lights. The footsteps in the dust piled up on the floor. Light from the monitor shone through the swirling dust.

But the time immediately before and after were hazy.

How exactly did we get there and what path did we take?

They didn't know. Not one of them could remember. Before they knew it they were just there.

And how did we get back? And where was that building anyway?

"Think about it. It's the middle of summer and the island is in the subtropics. Do you think the kids on that island of all places would wear a jet black uniform? They'd die of heatstroke!"

"Maybe she came from somewhere else like us?" suggested Kako.

"That's not really the issue though, is it? By the end everybody on the island knew all of our faces, but none of them had ever seen this girl," countered Mako.

True...

Waku remembered.

The girl calling herself Makishima Mayako definitely said, 'You guys want to save the world?' But when we woke up on the beach she was nowhere to be seen. The islanders said they'd never seen her, and the

idea of a girl walking around dressed in black in midsummer was enough to make us laugh.

“I’m telling you it was a dream. A hallucination because of the heat,” Kanji insisted.

“I can’t see how it could be. It doesn’t add up. A hallucination that real over such a long time... every one of us should get to the hospital if that’s what happened,” continued Kako.

A dream? Well, we had a conversation with a girl who doesn’t exist in a building that doesn’t exist. The word dream sure seems to sum it up quite well. Anybody would say so if you explained it to them. But even then if so many children insisted it was real and they all remembered the girl and the old building... Can so many people all have the same dream? There is such a thing as a ‘group hallucination’. But this isn’t as simple as mistaking sheets on the washing line for a ghost. Our memories of the actual conversation we had with this Makishima Mayako are identical. I just can’t believe hallucinations like that can happen. What Kanji and Mako said is true. There is no old school on the island. So, could there be some way to get off the island and back again in such a short time? Then the conversation with the girl in the old school is impossible.

If it’s impossible then the word dream fits perfectly. But then...

Even though some of the children, particularly Kako, strongly insisted the girl was real, it still seemed impossible. Kako wanted to believe the girl was real. Or rather, he wanted to believe the girl’s story was real.

Waku followed Kako's thought process.

It was real exactly because it's impossible. If it really did happen then regardless of the girl, it must have been somewhere off the island, so it must have been someone with the power to teleport us. But then what if the girl's story was real too? Enemies attacking the Earth. A giant robot to fight them off. Even if something like that did exist they'd surely be able to teleport as well. From Kako's point of view it wasn't just impossible, it has to be real precisely because it was impossible.

Waku could find a way to agree with either side.

And so Waku came to his conclusion.

"Well, I don't know for sure either way, but one side or the other has to be true. But which is better? Which would I prefer to believe? I say the version which isn't a dream. All that about heroes fighting to save the Earth? I'd like to give that a try, to be honest."

He understood Kako's feelings well. A giant robot fighting for the Earth. It can't exist; it doesn't take much thinking to work that out. But if you believe it for just a second, something in your heart starts to want it to be true. The idea that they could pilot would be truly amazing. Waku didn't have the urge to insist it was absolutely true like Kako, but he understood that feeling.

Kako will take heart if I support him.

"Exactly. You get it, don't you, Waku? Piloting a robot and fighting — it's every boy's dream."

“Robots aren’t just for boys, you know!” Mako’s rebuttal gave Kako an opportunity, and he jumped at the chance.

“Ah! Fantastic! You get it too! So we all agree the story was real.”

“We were talking about two different things. Don’t confuse what you want with what is logical.”

It was already past 10pm and the conversation didn’t seem like it would end any time soon. Only one person, Ushiro, lay in the corner of the room, declaring simply, ‘I’m not interested.’ Although, it seemed he still wanted to know what was going on, because if he really wasn’t interested he could have moved further away.

Then...

“Umm... when is anybody going to notice me?” A voice suddenly descended from above. The group was startled and they looked up.

Before anyone knew it... it was floating there.

An elliptical triangular... face, I suppose. Two large bulges... ears? A small body. What sort of weird-looking toy is this?

Waku was confused.

The unidentified object was somehow floating in the air, and even talking.

It seemed to have a strange edgeless form, in other words, weird-looking. Thoroughly weird-looking. It was the sort of thing you see as a mascot with a weird name on school handouts or in the empty spaces on leaflets from small companies; the kind of definitively non-cute character drawn

by somebody who thinks they have some artistic talent but should in all honesty just give up, except ten times more weird-looking.

That's why when Waku made first contact with the thing he was more insulted than surprised.

"What's... that?" he said, pointing.

"A plushie for Anko to hug while she sleeps?"

"Not something as weird-looking as that!" barked Kanji, who was the real expert on teasing Anko, without a second's delay.

"So... she hugs a plushie while she sleeps?" added Kanji.

"How is that any of your business?" said Anko, getting worked up into the usual quarrel.

Just a couple of minutes since first contact and they'd already forgotten about its existence.

"Is that enough then? Is it? Is it enough now? Pilots?"

...What?

"Pilots?"

"Indeed. You made the contract, correct? That's why I came to meet you."

The contract... Pilots...

It was exactly the topic the children had been discussing. Was it real? Was it just a dream? Someone — or something, anyway — had appeared who also knew about it.

That means...

“Hey you! Does that mean you know that girl? So it really was real! We really are going to save the Earth!” Kako’s eyes sparkled.

“First you call a person weird-looking and suchlike and then it’s ‘hey you’? This sort of thing really is very rude.”

“Person? You mean you!” Maria took up the conversation.

“Was that a criticism? No, that is incorrect,” replied the creature.

“Then... a monkey?”

“Why a monkey?”

“It has a monkey-sort-of face.”

“Incorrect.”

“Incorrect, eh? I guess monkeys aren’t that weird-looking.”

“You are exceedingly rude you people! Are you finished? It would be very bad if I were to lose my temper, you know. I don’t know just what might happen!”

“So, what are you then?”

“Koyemshi.”

“Koe... what?”

“How rude! Ko-e-mu-shi! Koyemshi, okay? It’s Koyemshi! That’s what I am.”

“I’m the superhero who’s going to support you people! It seems it’ll be a long relationship with some of you and a short one with others, so tell me now which way it’s going to be. Come on, speak up!”

The strange creature calling itself Koyemshi spoke at length with its shrill voice. Naturally, nobody answered.

“I can’t fathom it! I’ve never seen such an attitude! Honestly, what is the young miss thinking choosing you people?”

At that moment...

...*Thud*...A vibration began to shake the ship.

“Earthquake...?”

“Ah! And that would mean we’re ready to go! I must say I’m very apprehensive about this. Ah well, you people were chosen as the latest set. I can give you the super-quick tour I suppose. Perhaps a quick look at the outside first?”

“At what...?”

“What? Why, the same as always of course. The plushie! The plushie! The plushie you’ll be piloting! Or the robot or mobile suit or whatever you prefer.”

The fourteen children followed after the strange creature, Koyemshi. Unbelievably, Koyemshi moved floating in the air, followed excitedly by Kako. Waku took up last place as he pushed Kozue's wheelchair, suppressing his impatience. In actual fact, the wheelchair was motorized and there was no need to push, but Waku felt a certain sense of duty.

I have to protect her.

That's what he thought the first time he met Kozue.

Kako pushed open the heavy doors and they came out onto the deck. The sea air blew into the ship. Even though it was August, it was evening at sea and the wind was cold.

"Are you cold? Shall I get your coat?" Waku asked Kozue.

"I'm fine. Don't worry so much. I'm not a princess."

Koyemshi moved onto the deck and stopped abruptly in mid-air.

"That is it. That is your Puppet. The power that you will wield to save your Earth," it said in its piercing tone.

But there was nothing there. There was no robot to be seen.

All they could see from the deck was the jet black darkness of the night. The children looked dubious.

"What? Where? What?" came Waku's dumbfounded voice.

"Hey, are you trying to trick us?" Kako lashed out at Koyemshi.

Koyemshi floated around him as though to tease the boy, saying, “What would I gain by doing such a thing? Look carefully. It’s over there.”

But all the children could see was an area of darkness, not even a single star.

“There are no stars...”

That can’t be.

They were at sea, far from the lights of the city. The sky should have been serene, filled with stars and totally clear. The Milky Way cut across the moonlit night sky. But before their eyes its arching river was unnaturally broken. In one section there was only the deepest darkness.

“What’s there?”

That’s it. It must be there.

The thing Koyemshi called the ‘Puppet’ must be there.

It wasn’t that the children couldn’t make it out. It was simply so enormous that they failed to recognize it. As their eyes became accustomed to the dark night its shape gradually revealed itself. The silhouette was definitively human. It had two arms and two legs. But it was distorted. The arms were long and dragged in the sea. They descended perhaps as far as the top of the feet. It was composed of sharp angles, with pointed protrusions all over its form. Large prominences extended from its shoulders. It didn’t have anything to call a neck, and its head seemed to be embedded in its torso. An armor plated upright spider. That would

be the summary description. Or, as Waku instinctively put it with much greater conciseness, “It’s massive!”

Exactly! There was no word for it but massive. The robot Waku had imagined had been tens of meters high, about the same height as a building, but this was nowhere close to that. It was an awesome size, more like a mountain. It was ridiculously huge. It was so absurdly large that it was impossible to say how large it was. Looking at it was no match for looking at a whale. It simply boggled the mind. It made you unsteady on your feet. It made the onlooker feel detached from reality, throwing the normal physical senses out of order. The ship was still pushing ahead on the ocean, so they should have been gradually getting further away from it, but it didn’t seem to be diminishing in size at all. It was still enormous.

“It must be 500 meters tall,” Kanji muttered in shock.

“How would you know?” asked Kodama.

“I can just tell,” came Kanji’s inscrutable answer.

At that, the children’s muttering stopped and they fell into silence.

It was simply overwhelming. Its enormity alone betrayed its power. Their feelings were beyond being moved or shocked, they were humbled.

Such a thing, here.

“We’re... going to... pilot that thing?” Waku finally squeaked.

How could middle schoolers like us hope to control such a thing?

“Oh yes,” Koyemshi said chirpily. “You will use it to fight for the Earth. Okay, let’s get going, shall we? The enemy will turn up soon so I’d better show you around the cockpit.”

“What?”

Suddenly.

Their surroundings changed.

It was a featureless white space, and they were inside it. In front of them was a wall, white, with an ellipse cut into it. In the cut-out was an image of the night sky and the sea.

Not so much a window, more of a screen. But the perspective is ridiculously high.

The sea was far away beneath them. It seemed like a perspective from within the giant. Surrounding the elliptical screen were a dozen or so chairs, floating in the air.

The robot’s cockpit...? Waku thought instantly, but then he noticed the chairs were all random designs.

Aside from a few unremarkable chairs like the one he had in his own room and a couple of rocking chairs, they were all different and yet arranged in a neat circle.

That one...

Next to one of the chairs, a cheap-looking office chair you might see in the staff room at a middle school, stood an unknown man. He looked to

be in his late twenties and wore a suit. Perhaps it was just his unshaven face, but he gave the impression of being exhausted.

And then, in an instant, a girl.

Maaya. Makishima Mayako.

“Hello again. Sorry for making you wait. You didn’t forget about me did you?” said the girl, smiling at the children.

“Forget? I’ve been waiting to meet you again!” yelled Kako, clearly excited.

“I believed you! I knew your story was real!”

Kako’s reaction was as expected. After all it was Kako who hoped more than anyone that the girl’s story was true. His hopes were there to see before his eyes, and on a scale even he himself didn’t imagine. The sheer mass of the giant they’d witnessed from the ship was eloquent proof of the irrefutable truth of the ‘game to save the world’ the girl had talked about. Of course, Kako wasn’t the only one who was pleased. He was just a leading member of that group.

What have we gotten ourselves involved in here?

It was an unusual circumstance to say the least. Maria and some of the other girls looked at Maaya with critical expressions, as though trying to discern what exactly this girl in front of them was. Komo and several of the others seemed afraid of the giant that had appeared before them, and looked toward Maaya in fear. Waku noticed Kozue’s worried eyes looking up at him.

“It’s okay. I’m... I mean... we’re all here for you. If this really does turn out to be something dangerous we can just quit...” he said quietly.

Kako hadn’t noticed the mood of some of the others at all.

“So what do we do? Come on, let’s get to it!”

“Hey! Don’t speak to the young miss in that way!”

“It’s okay, Koyemshi. Thank you... Kako, isn’t it? I’m happy you asked. Well, I’d better introduce our guest. This is the Teacher who will show you how to fight. He will take on the first battle, so pay close attention to what he does, okay?”

“Pleased to meet you.” The man introduced as Teacher looked over the children. His introduction was quiet and curt.

“Could you be a little more courteous?”

“No need. We’ll only meet briefly.”

“Oh, not even for your final students?”

Was she being sarcastic there?

For the first time, the beginnings of an expression were discernable on his face. But of course, Waku didn’t recognize the emotions hidden by that inscrutable face, a combination of anger, sorrow and exhaustion.

“It’s here.”

The Teacher turned his back on the children and sat on a nearby chair.

“There!” Mako yelled.

The starry sky was visible in the elliptical window, but a single star had vanished. Before their eyes more and more stars were enveloped by the darkness. A hole was opening in the sky, but it didn’t seem to take any shape. As they watched, the hole grew, and then four pointed white towers extended down from the sky to the ocean surface. The ocean was otherwise empty, but the towers nevertheless seemed unbelievably huge — at least the same size as the giant robot they witnessed and were now riding inside. Lit by moonlight, the giant white columns reached the ocean.

Something else was coming, following them down. The children realized the columns were legs.

“Is that... the enemy?”

“A... spider!”

The overall impression was similar to the view they’d had of their robot from the ship. A Spider made of layered armor. The main difference was the color. Rather than the jet black of their robot, this one was pure white. Also, while their robot stood upright on two legs, this one stood on all four legs. On its face were ten or so lights, giving the impression of eyes.

The night sea.

The two giants faced off above the calm waves.

The black Puppet and the white Spider.

“All right! Are all of our contracted heroes ready?” Maaya asked.

“Wooo!” Kako hooted.

But...

“Fight? That horrible thing?”

“Isn’t this dangerous?” Anko and Komo said almost simultaneously.

“Oh, don’t worry. This Puppet is very strong. We’re absolutely fine. If you’re really that afraid I could return you to the ship, but honestly you’ll be safer here.” Maaya seemed to tell them off.

“No, but... this... it was a dream! It’s some sort of trick!” Kodama snapped, like a rabbit in the headlights. It came out more as incoherent panic than a question.

And then...

A light flickered and the space the children were in rocked gently.

“Enough silly chatter!” the Teacher interrupted. “The enemy’s coming. Stop talking and pay attention to how to fight.”

It’s going to be you doing this next. This isn’t some idle pastime. This is real!”

The Teacher made his point, then fixed his eyes on the front screen.

“Right. Here we go. Let’s take it to the enemy.”

The children's eyes converged on the front screen. A horn above the enemy's, the Spider's, head lit up, and suddenly a flash of lightning zig-zagged towards them.

"Ahh!"

"No!"

A host of short shrieks were heard.

The front screen filled with flashes the same as before, again gently rocking the room.

But...

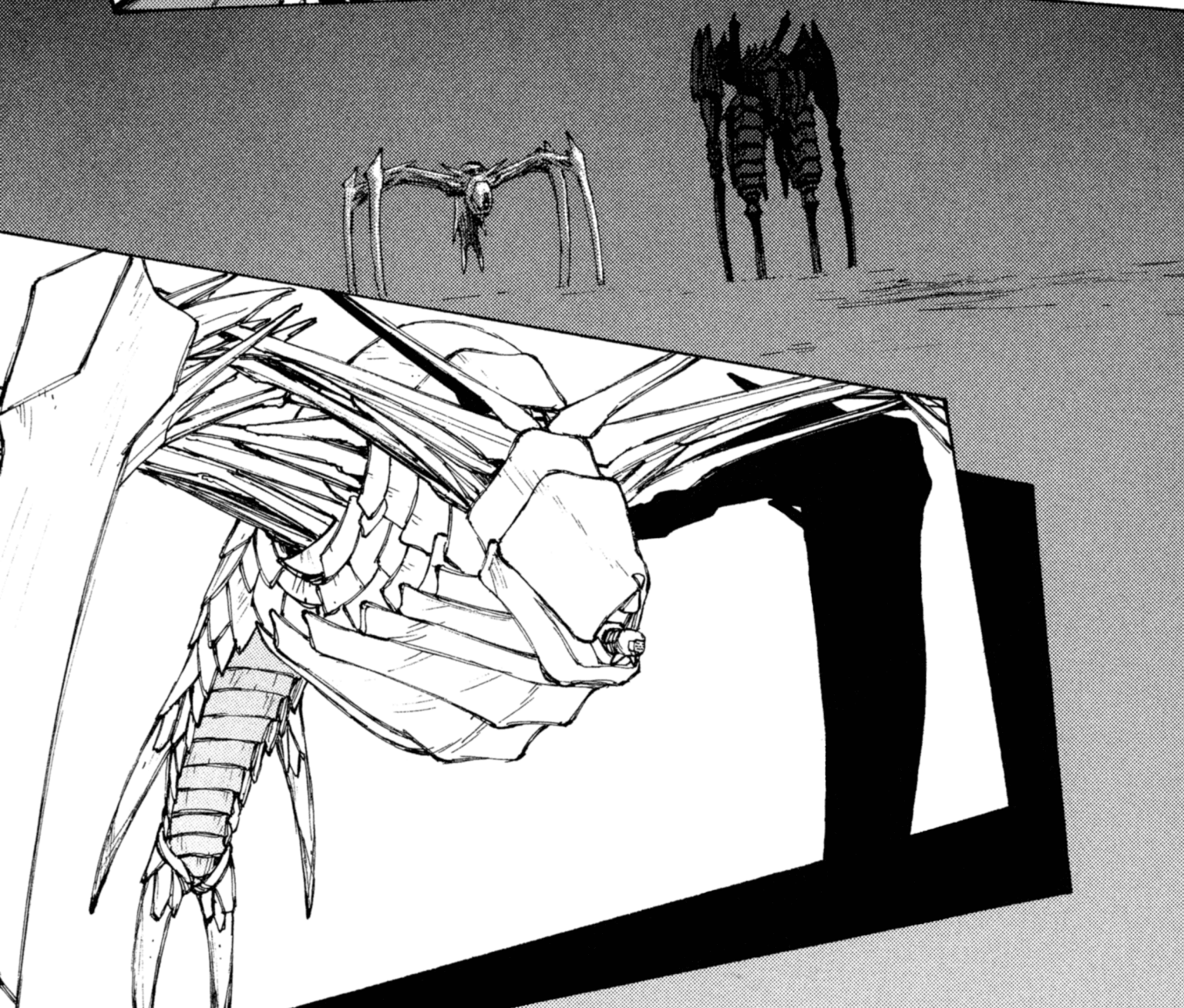
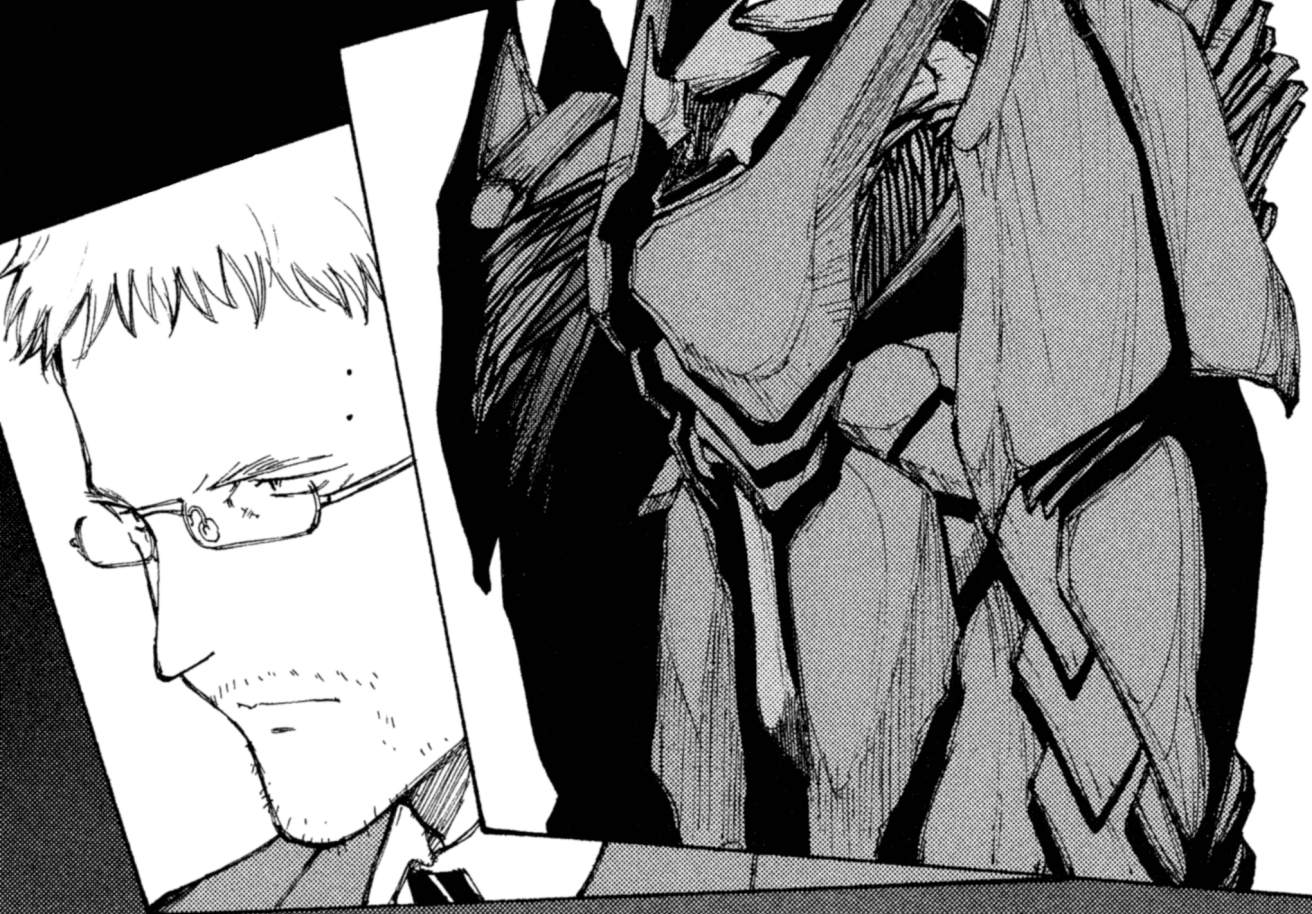
That was all.

"What? Was that an attack?"

"Just a bluff. Okay, then..."

The children saw the attack as something of an anti-climax. But of course they wouldn't be saying that if they weren't inside this oversized monster. The attack was unquestionably one of pure destructive power. If they had seen that giant, hundreds of meters tall, fire off such an attack from a human perspective, they would have dropped everything and run for their lives. But the way the attack was brushed off like a gust of wind betrayed the absurd power of the giant they inhabited.

"Right, the lesson starts now," said the Teacher. "The plushie — err, that's what we call this Puppet we pilot to fight the enemy. This plushie also has ranged attack weapons. They look like this — attack!"



Suddenly the wide expanse of sky in front of them was split by uncountable straight blue lines. As the Teacher said the word 'attack' the beams shot out towards the Spider.

The blue beams impacted on the Spider, only to be repelled by its armor.

Ricochet. Some flew up into the sky, others dived into the ocean. The Spider seemed unmoved.

"Just like us, this thing has thick armor. A trifling attack like this won't be able to pierce it. The firing weapons are basically a screen."

As though in response to his words, the giant took a single step forward.

"Wha... it moved!"

"There's no special trick to making it move. You just think walk and it walks."

The giant advanced towards the enemy. Again, a zig-zag of lightning flashed towards them. Again, the dull vibration rocked the room. Komo let out a short shriek and held Mako. The Teacher seemed oblivious to the state of the children, and continued his explanation.

"Firing attacks are almost never a decisive blow for either side."

The Puppet walked right up to the Spider.

"So..."

The black giant raised its long, sharp, needle-like arms.

“...you tear off their armor by force!”

It struck!

The enemy's armor which had so easily repelled their lasers smashed like porcelain. The sharp, piercing arms stabbed deep into the Spider. The action was followed by a noise. It echoed deep in its abdomen. It was a low and extremely heavy noise, almost a vibration. It was the 500 meter giant's attack breaking through the sound barrier!

Then the left arm began to rise. Another attack slammed down. Another. Shards of the crumpled armor came away, chasing the right arm as it pulled back.

“A... amazing...” Waku murmured quietly in shock.

It was overwhelming. That was power. Pure power.

A righteous giant robot fighting for the earth.

For Waku those words conjured up a vision of piloting some sort of cutting edge technology equipped with laser beams and missiles, heroically fighting with brightly colored beams like in the movies. But the scene unfolding in front of them couldn't be more different. The enemy's lightning attacks and the giant's screening lasers certainly looked impressive, but they were like child's play compared to this power. There was nothing showy or beautiful about repeatedly raising an arm and striking it down. It couldn't be more straightforward. The enormous weight of the arms stuck with unceasing speed. But that was all. It was so simple. That was the essence of this dark giant's power.

And so, discussing it seemed useless. How could you possibly stop the blows raining down from a 500 meter giant summoning all of its strength? Strike! Strike! Another strike!

A flash!

The enemy struck out with its lightning in a vain struggle against the attacks, trying to jump out of the way and breakaway from the embrace. It had already lost one of its four legs, and several areas of armor had been broken away.

“You must stay on your guard when the enemy has sustained damage. They can regenerate. As soon as you gain the upper hand you have to finish it.”

Again the giant advanced to close the small distance to the enemy. And then it happened. A sound which tore up the very air.

The Teacher’s field of view darted left and right.

Then, as though prompted by the confusion, a square viewing window opened up on top of the existing window. It showed two small luminous points in the sky.

Stars? No, they’re moving too fast.

“This planet’s military?” the Teacher muttered. The window zoomed in as though in response to his question to show two aircraft. Canard delta wings with two-dimensional thrust vector nozzles. Bubble canopies jutted out of the nose to improve pilot visibility. They were fighters operated by both the Air Force and the Navy.

“Type 88s! They must have scrambled from Hyakuri Base!” screamed Mako.

“They were probably deployed to the littoral region to escort the Sino-Japanese-Korean Treaty ballistic missile defense test, of course on the pretext of exercises by the US rapid reaction fleet. The Self Defense Forces are twitchy at the moment.”

“It would be strange if they didn’t check out two giants out at sea.” Maria added, making good use of her inside knowledge as the daughter of a military officer, although honestly Waku and the others didn’t really understand what she was saying.

The two fighters began a rapid descent, presumably to confirm the existence of the giants which had suddenly appeared, and approached the location of the fight.

“N... no, stay away!” Waku yelled without thinking.

It was certainly a risky move just from the sheer size of the giants. Had the otherworldliness of the scene made them lose their sense of judgment? Or maybe they knew the risks but were coming in to obtain more information. Whichever it was the actions of the two fighters were reckless.

The Spider fired its lightning weapon in an attempt to get away, and the Puppet fired its lasers in response. Both were empty attacks and ricocheted off the armor, simply lighting up the night sky. To the two approaching fighter planes, however, the barrage was a lethal force, and they were diving squarely into it. The ranged weapons may only have

been diversions to the two giants, but to light fighter aircraft less than 20 meters in size they were deadly.

“Stop!” shouted Mako, but the Teacher didn’t even look up and again closed the gap and fired the lasers. Then, a laser beam ricocheted off the giant’s head and struck the center of the fuselage of one of the fighters, turning it instantly into a small ball of flames.

“Ahh!”

“I said stop!”

A mixture of cries of terror and anger rang out.

“He can’t help it,” said Maaya, “He’s not from this planet. He doesn’t know anything about the life or death of these people.”

“What?”

“He’s an alien?”

“He’s not human?”

Maaya’s words had turned the children’s attention to the Teacher.

“Don’t be stupid! Of course I’m human. I don’t live on this planet but I’m just as human as any of you!”

It was the first time the Teacher seemed to assert himself.

“I’m going to show you this once. Your fight is a fight to save the earth. You do want to protect all the people on this planet, right? Of course you do. But the fight will be intense. If I avoid attacking here and now, I can

probably save that fighter plane. But that would mean letting the enemy get away and risking losing the battle, and that would be the end for this world. If you really want to protect the people of this world, you have to be willing to sacrifice anyone to do it.” The Teacher spoke clearly but in a somewhat downbeat tone.

“But that’s...”

“That doesn’t sound heroic to me!”

The children protested, but the Teacher flatly interrupted them.

“What you need to do is concentrate on how I’m fighting. If you don’t, many, many more people will die!”

“I won’t be here next time. You’ll only have your own strength to rely on.”

“Hey, Koyemshi and I will be helping too!” said Maaya.

“I dislike it, honestly, but if the young miss says so, so be it,” added Koyemshi.

The Teacher looked at Maaya and Koyemshi, “Don’t trust these two. Not if you really want to save the world.”

“How mean! We went to all this trouble to find the next pilots and this is how he repays us.”

Suddenly there was a huge crash, bigger than any of the previous ones. The enemy had taken the opportunity of their discussion to throw itself at them. It used its rear legs to hold on and its remaining front leg to attack. The room shook with each blow and the children began to panic.

The Teacher, however, was calm, and spoke to the children, “This is what I was saying. If you don’t stay alert it will counterattack. One distraction can mean defeat.

If you get the advantage, press it. No mercy. Don’t be afraid to make sacrifices.”

A lightning attack flashed from point blank range.

The Teacher continued, “This room is in the deepest part of the Puppet, protected by thick armor. It can’t be damaged easily, so whatever you do...”

As he spoke the giant’s right leg kicked the enemy high into the air. It landed, causing an explosion on the ocean surface. It rolled clumsily two maybe three times, perhaps to absorb the impact of the fall. As it did so its rear leg crumbled and broke away.

“Whatever you do... Bah, this one’s strong.”

Any reasonable person would say the enemy was finished. It attempted to right itself using its remaining two legs, but it didn’t seem able to continue the fight.

“We did it! We finished it off! It’s down!” Kako yelled excitedly.

The Teacher turned to Kako. Waku noticed an inscrutable but complex expression on the Teacher’s face. Kako was stopped in his tracks.

Did I say something wrong? It looks like I did...

The Teacher returned his gaze to the window. “I see.” He sighed deeply. “Let’s finish this.”

The dark giant advanced towards the Spider, which was still firing its ineffective lightning attack.

“This is the finisher. Watch carefully.”

He kicked the enemy again, flipping it on its back like a stranded turtle before drilling a jet black arm into its exposed underbelly.

“They have what we call a critical zone.” He ripped the armor away sheet by sheet. “The location depends on the enemy.” He skillfully disassembled — dissected — the enemy. “You can never be sure where it is, but...”

Finally.

“It’s generally deep within the body, buried under countless layers of armor... Found you!”

He used the giant’s three fingers to take hold of a spherical object, something like a bulb with a shell, from deep in the abdomen.

“Find it.” A light shone from the end of the finger.

“And smash it.” A multitude of laser beams shot out and destroyed the object. The slits on the enemy’s head went dark. It seemed like the finishing blow. It had ceased to move completely.

“We did it!”

“Wow!”

The children cheered.

“You did it!” applauded Kako.

But the Teacher didn’t show any sign of being pleased whatsoever. He showed no interest in Kako, and simply scanned each of the chairs, as though confirming each one. For some reason he looked at Waku with particular sorrow. Finally, he let out a deep sigh and said, “That’s it. My job is done.”

A husk, Waku thought. The Teacher somehow seemed to shrink into himself, as though he’d actually lost everything in the fight.

“Now it’s your turn. You’ll protect your own world.”

“All right, let’s do it!” said Waku, raising his voice as though to cheer the Teacher’s spirits.

He didn’t answer.

There was a long silence.

“Y... you...” The words left his mouth with a long breath.

“...ta...” But the group never got to hear the rest.

The man abruptly disappeared, leaving only the chair he was sitting on, nothing more. Nothing of him remained.

“His role is now complete,” said Maaya coldly. “Now, you must have seen this on TV or in manga: an ancient lone hero protecting the earth.

He fought tirelessly for the earth, but finally reached his limit when fighting a powerful enemy, so he gives himself to protect the earth, and passes his power on to another.

To youthful heroes overflowing with altruism, children who can carry the burden of this planet. That's you." Maaya looked over the children as she spoke. "The fate of the world hangs on you."

The words rang heavily.

It makes sense, Waku thought. The Teacher piloted this giant — the Puppet — and easily brought down the Spider. But could anyone else, other than the Puppet, really have done the same? Even that military fighter was shot down before it even got close. Would a nuclear bomb affect it? Maybe even that wouldn't touch it. There probably isn't another thing on Earth other than the thing we're inside of now, other than us, who can protect the world. Didn't the girl in the old school house say there were fourteen enemies left? Can we really do it... save the world?

As though sensing their hesitation, Maaya continued, "Don't worry. The Puppet has power."

Power.

"Yes, without power everything would vanish. Without power there is nothing. Power is the sole absolute truth in this fight."

"Well, well, well. Young miss, I have no more time to trouble myself with these humble proceedings. See, we have more curious onlookers."

A new light had appeared in the front window.

A metallic roar filled the air. Another air force fighter had arrived.

A Type 41 fighter. It was an old F-15J from the US-Japan Security Treaty. They were known as the supreme masters of the skies for over thirty years, operating under the US rules of engagement, but were now dismissed as over the hill. Regardless, Japan had modernized the model and they were still used in active service.

“We don’t really want to attract attention. Let’s call an end for today.

I’ll take these back to the ship.”

“Good,” Maaya nodded. “Well, we’ll meet again.”

Then, before anyone knew it, they were standing on the deck of the boat, above them the cloudless night sky, and ahead just the quiet ocean, nothing more.

“That... was real, wasn’t it?” Waku muttered.

Nobody could answer him.

The hand holding the back of Kozue’s wheelchair still had a clammy sweat.

Daikatsumaru No. 1 was the second of two super cargo and passenger ferries which had operated since before the millennium as a lifeline connecting the archipelago 1,500km south of Tokyo to the mainland. It took around 24 hours from the mainland to the island group.

Higher speed TSL craft were considered at the beginning of the century, but the large, high speed vessels made possible by the technology had

the potential for adaption to military use, so in order to preserve international relations with other Asiatic countries they never came to fruition. The ferry was built over 30 years ago, but was due to continue the island to mainland service for some time yet.

It was a full moon on a summer night when the Daikatsumaru encountered a strange storm.

In the middle of a tranquil voyage with a perfectly clear sky a tempest suddenly rose from the sea. The ship was shaken and jolted for about an hour. The forecast had been for calm seas, and the crew initially put it down to an earthquake, that is, until the turmoil continued for such a long time.

The truth is there was a minor earthquake at exactly that time, but one lasting an unnaturally long time. Not only that, a shallow location on the route of the Daikatsumaru was at the epicenter. But that couldn't possibly have caused the unprecedented tsunami that assaulted the ship.

Although the impact was light, it was enough to damage a lot of equipment and furnishings on the vessel. Of course, well-secured internal furnishings did occasionally get damaged when the ship suffered a storm, but this storm was just somehow much fiercer. One crewman joked that, "It was as though giant monsters were fighting right by the ship."

In the end there were no injuries, so the crew quickly went back to their day-to-day tasks and forgot about the incident. It was about a month later when Yamanobe Isao, the Captain of the Daikatsumaru No. 2, was

called to the president's office. Yamanobe was a veteran who served on a previous incarnation of the vessel, and was a generation older than the current president. Despite being the head of a shipping company, the president suffered badly with seasickness and Yamanobe had been forced to nurse him in his pre-captain days. Even now, the president was unable to stand up to Yamanobe.

A man and woman unfamiliar to Yamanobe were also present in the president's office, but there was no sign of his usual private secretary. The two introduced themselves as Naval Lieutenant Masamitsu Seki and Air Captain Misumi Tanaka. Before Yamanobe could even wonder what uniformed forces wanted with him, they began to explain.

He mustn't ever say anything about the strange storm on the night of the full moon. If he were to reveal it they would have to take action in the interest of national defense.

Their tone was courteous, but the threat was clear. Defying them would not be a good idea. It was clear that since the abolition of the US-Japan Security Treaty — something which seemed impossible in his youth, absolutely unimaginable — the military were up to something in that area of ocean.

“People don't need to know about my world, sometimes it's better for them not to know.”

Yamanobe made light of agreeing to their requests. He swore on the sea and his dead mother. He thought the conversation would end there, but the pair continued, asking about 14 children on board his ship that day, and whether he noticed anything about those children.

“Children...?”

“Yes, on that day your ship carried children returning from a school trip on the island. And that evening was the storm.”

“There were no injuries to any passengers, the crew made sure of that, but I do know that they couldn’t find those children at the time.”

They weren’t swept overboard, he wondered, suddenly frozen in fear.

The children said they’d been playing hide and seek on the ship, but it does seem strange that an experienced crew with ten years’ experience on the ship couldn’t find them. Where on earth were they? He remembered being concerned about the issue.

But inside the ship everything was in chaos, so I just dismissed those concerns over time.

Why are these military types coming to me to ask these things? I know that sometimes it’s better for a person like me not to see and not to know certain things, but what connection could there be to those children? Yamanobe couldn’t get his head round it.

If only Yamanobe could have looked at some of the documents held by the female officer, Air Captain Tanaka — of course, that would be impossible — those doubts might have been addressed a little. One page, for example, went as follows...

Communications Log

Department Restricted

First Lieutenant Iwasaki (Call sign: Peekaboo2, below P2): “This is Peekaboo2. Remaining unknown object has disappeared! Repeat disappeared!”

Controller: “We have also lost visual on both objects. By disappeared do you mean the unknown object has moved?”

P2: “Negative. It vanished in the same way it appeared.”

Controller: “Vanished? Are you sure about that?”

P2: “How would I lose track of something that big? I don’t get it but it just disappeared like out of the movies.”

Controller: “So both have disappeared?”

P2: “That’s a negative. They were fighting and one defeated the other, then the winner disappeared. No, hold... there’s no debris. The debris of the defeated object has also disappeared. The unknown objects are no longer here. Requesting a rescue ship for Peekaboo Leader.”

Controller: “On its way. Can you confirm whether Peekaboo Leader escaped?”

P2: “Negative. I cannot confirm.”

Waku couldn't sleep.

Waku and the others had returned to the ship to find it in turmoil. They tried to find out what happened from the crew and were told that a sudden storm erupted in the calm night, that they first thought it might be an earthquake but it didn't quite add up. They said even some crew were seasick and expressed amazement at how the children were so calm. Waku gave the excuse that they were very well disciplined.

But... Waku knew the real cause.

It was those things fighting — of course that would stir up the sea.

Mako claimed it was a hallucination, even after all that had happened.

It's like she's trying to convince herself. But it really did happen. It was all real.

And so Waku couldn't sleep. He left the dormitory to avoid waking the others, although he could sense that the others were just resting and couldn't sleep either.

He stepped out onto the deck and watched the tranquil night sea. The islands where they'd spent the summer were already out of sight, and the mainland was still far away.

Then he noticed someone else was also on deck. It was Tsubasa. She was talking on her cellphone.

“Yes, okay. Yes, everything was fine. I get back tomorrow... Okay. Say hi to Nagi-kun. Okay, goodnight.”

Ah, she's just finishing the call.

She hung up and was putting the cellphone away when she noticed Waku.

“Waku-kun, what are you doing here?”

“Oh, sorry. Did I interrupt you?”

“No, I was just finished. No problem.”

“You're always on the phone, on the island as well. Is it your boyfriend?”

“No! Just a friend.”

“But it's a guy, right? Are guys who specially call really just friends?”

“W... what sort of phrase is that? It's like my dad, always saying that getting close to boys will lead to trouble. You sounded just like him. Why are you playing the protective father?”

“Oh! Umm... I didn't mean to... I mean... Are you serious?” Waku was confused.

Tsubasa started to laugh, most likely at the state Waku had got himself into.

“I thought Kodama was the only one with a cellphone,” Waku remarked purely out of curiosity.

The Hino Report.

US Forces evacuated from Japan when the US-Japan Security Treaty was repealed. After that the Sino-Japanese Security Treaty was signed almost immediately. This incident had a definitive influence on the current state of geopolitics in Asia, not only international affairs, but a whole range of domestic issues, large and small. One of those is cellphones.

In the events described in the Hino Report, Japan, which had relatively low security awareness, was hit by a large-scale cyber-attack. National communications networks were wiped out in a flash. The economic damage was in the tens of trillions of yen. It was rumored to be a retaliation by the US, but the full story wasn't known. The incident led to intense security measures being placed on communications. It was suddenly impossible to access the internet, for example, without authenticating your national ID number and biometrics, meaning there was no degree of anonymity whatsoever. The IT industry was set back to the level of the late 20th century. As a result, while not outlawed completely, one of the things which became a rarity was cellphones. Acquiring one meant fighting through a complex procedure from stage one, initial document checks, to stage five, the face-to-face interview, and all in all it took about six months before it was in your hand. On top of that, charges were absurdly high, and content was rumored to be constantly monitored by the National Defense Forces. So, even some adults didn't have them, and they were never allowed into children's hands.

“Well, there are special circumstances with this friend. It’s not like I’m allowed one for nothing. Anyway, what about you? Aren’t you tired? “

Tsubasa brusquely diverted the conversation.

“Yeah... but I just can’t sleep.”

Waku was the kind of boy who easily got caught up in things.

“I guess I’m still over-excited. Like before a match, it was always like this. Well, this is even worse.”

“Match? Oh, you were in the soccer team, weren’t you?”

“I was good!” Waku lit up at the new topic. “The best regular in history.”

“Cool. Popular with the girls?”

“Err, well...”

The unexpected line of questioning blocked him just as he was looking forward to bragging about his technique.

“Well, yeah. I guess. I don’t know to be honest. I never really thought about it. I had lots of friends who were girls but I always preferred the soccer.”

“Wow, other guys are definitely going to hate you when you get older. Definitely. I guarantee it. If I’m wrong you can have the cellphone.”

“What, that? It’s fingerprint protected anyway — I wouldn’t be able to use it.”

“Are you crazy? Well, anyway, it’s true. Girls always prefer guys that don’t show they’re interested. You have to feel sorry for people like Kako-kun, always trying so hard. It’s probably fine normally but Chizu-chan won’t bite. Well, what does it matter? Chizu-chan prefers older guys anyway.”

“Kako? What?”

“Yeah, that’s what you’re like. It’s going to be hard for your future girlfriend. Wait... you... you didn’t notice — you must be the only one — that Kako-kun is hot for Chizu-chan?”

“Ah!” Waku’s jaw dropped as he put it together. “Of course! That’s why they’re always together.”

“You really only noticed now?”

“I noticed now.”

“Now?”

“Now.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Tsubasa let out an exaggerated sigh, “You’re so slow, Waku-kun...”

“Hold on, you don’t have to be that shocked. How could I work that out just because they hang around together?”

“If they’re always together you just know.”

“You don’t, not normally. You’re the slow one — reading too much into what guys and girls do. You’re like a gossiping aunt!”

“That’s not true at all. I saw nothing. I said nothing. Okay, I take it back.”

“Take what back?”

“That you were popular with girls. You know, the first three days or so the girls were all following you around, but you’re the type to lose interest.”

“What do you mean? I... I don’t, I mean... I don’t think I... Why are we even having this conversation? I’m not even that bothered about girls.”

Tsubasa let out another exaggerated sigh.

“It must be hard for Kozue-chan as well.”

“What?” Waku hadn’t expected her name to come up. “Why are you mentioning Kozue?”

“Hmm, can I ask you one more question?” asked Tsubasa, making a comic confused expression.

“Ok.”

“Do you like Kozue-chan?”

What?

Do you like Kozue-chan?

The question swam around Waku's head.

"I... I'm sorry? W... why?"

Why would she even ask me that? And why has it got me in such a flap?

"Well, you're always together."

Hearing it aloud, Waku realized it was true. It was just like with Chizu and Kako.

Me and Kozue probably spend more time together than anyone out of the group, Waku thought for the first time. Why do I spend so much time with Kozue? Why do I want to protect Kozue? Maybe it's something to do with why I joined the Nature School in the first place.

"Well..." started Waku.

"Yes?"

"It's a bit of a long story..."

"That's okay." Tsubasa noticed a change in Waku's tone. "Come on, answer."

Waku thought.

Where do I start? I'm no good at this — putting my thoughts in order and explaining things. I guess I'll have to start with soccer. That's the center of everything.

“Well, when I started at middle school I quit soccer.”

“Oh, why?”

“I needed time to think.

When I entered the club it was hard work. The training was strict and there was a lot of new stuff to learn, but at some point I realized I was good at it. I still am. The thing was there was someone who just couldn't do what I found so easy. At first I thought he wasn't taking it seriously or he wasn't training enough, but eventually I realized it wasn't that. I realized that some people just couldn't do what I could do. It's an awful thing to say but I have a talent that other people don't have. It's horrible to say, I know.”

Waku remembered entering the soccer club with his childhood friend. They swore to get in the regular team and lead them to victory. That's how it was going to be. But while Waku entered the regular team as early as the fourth grade, his friend was still sitting on the subs bench in the sixth.

I guess I just don't have what you have, Waku-kun.

That was when Waku quit.

“So, it made me think. There are probably people who can easily do things that I could never do. I started thinking it was strange that I could

kick a ball, place a pass exactly where I wanted it, or pick one up right in front of the goal. How come I can do those things but other people can't? What's the difference between people who can't do it and me? Even though I wanted to be a pro, I wondered how long it would be before I turned into the person who couldn't handle it anymore."

Waku thought about his father, a mediocre, stereotypical Japanese salaryman. Back in sixth grade during spring cleaning Waku found one of his father's old photo albums. He had been to the soccer national selection tournament during elementary school.

He was a forward just like me. They called him the bolt from the blue. He doesn't talk about it now; he's just crazy about baseball. What was it that happened to him? Maybe the same thing that happened to me... Maybe that day came...

"Maybe I was scared... I know soccer took everything out of me. I mean... It's not that I wanted to find myself, I just wanted to be away from it for a while, from soccer. I wanted to decide what I really wanted to do. So I quit soccer... and came here."

And met Kozue.

"Kozue... when I met her..."

Waku started to think about Kozue. *Why do I spend so much time with Kozue?* His thoughts wouldn't settle.

“I mean... Things that I take for granted, she can’t do at all. I just couldn’t let that alone. I could somehow do so well at sports, so I wanted to protect someone who’s less able.”

Is that right? Is that really what I think? If it’s just because she can’t walk, aren’t I the same as Komo?

She felt anemic and had to rest a few times during the Nature School. So, why Kozue? Words are too superficial. I just don’t have the words to describe it.

There was silence for a moment.

“I see.” Tsubasa seemed to have understood something, and her comment had a hint of disappointment about it.

After another gap in the conversation, Tsubasa asked, “Waku-kun, do you want to hear about me?”

“Yeah, ok.” The night wind was chilly and hid the flush that the conversation had brought to Waku’s face.

“I have two childhood friends, both boys,” Tsubasa began. “We lived next to each other in community housing. It’s always been the three of us. One is a real sports guy like you, and the other is more the bookish type, like a nice version of Ushiro-kun.”

“A nice version of Ushiro?”

That’s like comparing black with white, thought Waku.

“Heh. He’s so clever, and kind. I thought I’d always want us to be together, but gradually I’ve come to think that might be difficult.”

“Why?”

“...Because both of them like me.”

“So you’re popular too! The other girls must hate you.”

“Don’t poke fun! I don’t know which I like more, which I should choose, or if I do choose how our relationship will change. I had to deal with all of that but still pretend everything was normal between the three of us. But then, last year, one of them collapsed. He had a problem with his heart.”

Waku was taken aback.

“It was serious and he had to have a heart transplant straight away. He wouldn’t have survived for many years without it. Who knows whether he’s still okay while I’ve been away.”

“So, what about the cellphone?”

“Yeah, it’s for emergencies. Although, I don’t know what exactly would count as an emergency... Being out in the island, I know I wouldn’t be able to go running if my friend took a turn for the worse, but I think being in touch would help him.”

“I see...” Waku couldn’t find the words. “He’s your boyfriend?” he asked, embarrassed.

“Well,” Tsubasa replied cheerfully, trying to break the mood, “that’s the problem. Which one should I go out with?”

“Hmm... that puts me on the spot a little.”

“Okay, maybe. If I ask myself which one I have to protect, which one needs me the most, of course it’s the one with the heart problem. The other guy’s cute and clever and he’ll definitely find someone much nicer than me. That’s not true for the sick one. But, would he really be happy if we got together for that reason?”

“I guess not,” Waku answered uncomfortably, “it sounds like he wouldn’t.”

“Why?”

Waku desperately searched for the words, “He... probably... I think he’d prefer you to like him as him, rather than as the guy with the heart problem.”

“Yeah, I think so too. You see now how you have to think hard about stuff?”

“Think...”

Oh, about Kozue? But I really don’t know. I mean, I don’t have enough words for how I feel about her. I want to protect Kozue... I like Kozue... There’s such a range of feelings between those two.

But Waku couldn’t put a name to them. It was utterly frustrating.

The answer will come sooner or later.

“So, do you think what happened today was real?” he asked, returning to the same discussion yet again. The 500 meter robot. The black giant and the white spider.

“Yeah... at first I felt sorry for Kako-kun and I thought it was a dream. But now I believe it. It must have been real.”

“I was so hyped up! To be a hero trying to save the world! Does that make me a brat?”

“Hmm, I wonder...” Tsubasa laughed.

“Heh. I knew you believed it. But, you know, I didn’t find what I was looking for on the island — what I want to do, something I can do. But now, I think I might be able to find it. What I really, actually want to do.” Waku spoke as though persuading himself to do it.

“Aren’t you scared?” asked Waku.

“Yeah, of course. But if it was real, a real fight to save the world, wouldn’t the job of that girl Maaya normally be left to an adult? And why are we being asked to do this? Is there some special reason this has been left to us? We were chosen. That’s why we’re doing it. It sounds to me like we’re the only ones who could do it.”

Chosen. That’s right, we were chosen.

Soccer.

Kozue.

This fight.

My own future.

Waku's head overflowed with thoughts.

What am I going to do from now on? Become a pro soccer player? A hero saving the world? Or maybe something else entirely?

And... what about marriage... what if... maybe start a family... with Kozue?

And what then?

There are too many ifs, too many possibilities! That might be a good thing but it's so... overwhelming!

...

"Aaaaaaarrrrgghhh!" Waku screamed with all his might. The pressure of all the expectations and anxieties seethed out of him. The noise was absorbed by the night sea. Tsubasa stared at the new Waku in shock.

"Aaaaaaarrrrgghhh!"

Waku continued to scream.

"Waku-kun, did you call my name?"

Startled by Kozue's question, Waku paused to reflect.

Dawn was coming. The sea was a dark cloudy color. Skyscrapers were visible on the mainland. They were home. The ship came alongside into port. The children moved onto the deck and prepared for disembarkation. As usual Waku was pushing Kozue's wheelchair.

How long has it been since I stayed up all night? It must be before I joined the regular team. From then on, lack of sleep would have been unforgivable. Being in the team wasn't exactly carefree.

The robot.

My future.

And... Kozue...

“What? No, no, I don't think so.”

For a moment he couldn't talk normally with Kozue. His mind was focused on the conversation with Tsubasa the day before.

Do you like Kozue-chan?

When he thought about it, Kozue was very pretty.

Why didn't I notice before? Maybe I did call her name without thinking just now.

“Okay. Maybe it wasn't your voice. I probably misheard.” Either Waku's frantic denial had succeeded or Kozue had agreed to drop it.

“Oh, it's dad!” Some people were standing and waving at Kozue. One stood upright wearing branded sports clothes — from Waku's point of view, a ‘cool uncle’ kind of figure.

“Who's meeting you?” asked Kozue.

“Oh, I'll head back on my own.”

“Oh, right.

Do you have a few minutes? I want you to meet my dad.”

“Oh! Well, I have... err...”

“Oh, what?”

Waku was suddenly so aware of his relationship with Kozue, and with her father there too he was unable to act normally.

“Thank you for looking after Kozue. We’d be delighted to have you visit us any time.”

“Oh, yes. Thank you, yes.”

“We don’t live so far away from each other. Come and visit, okay?” added Kozue.

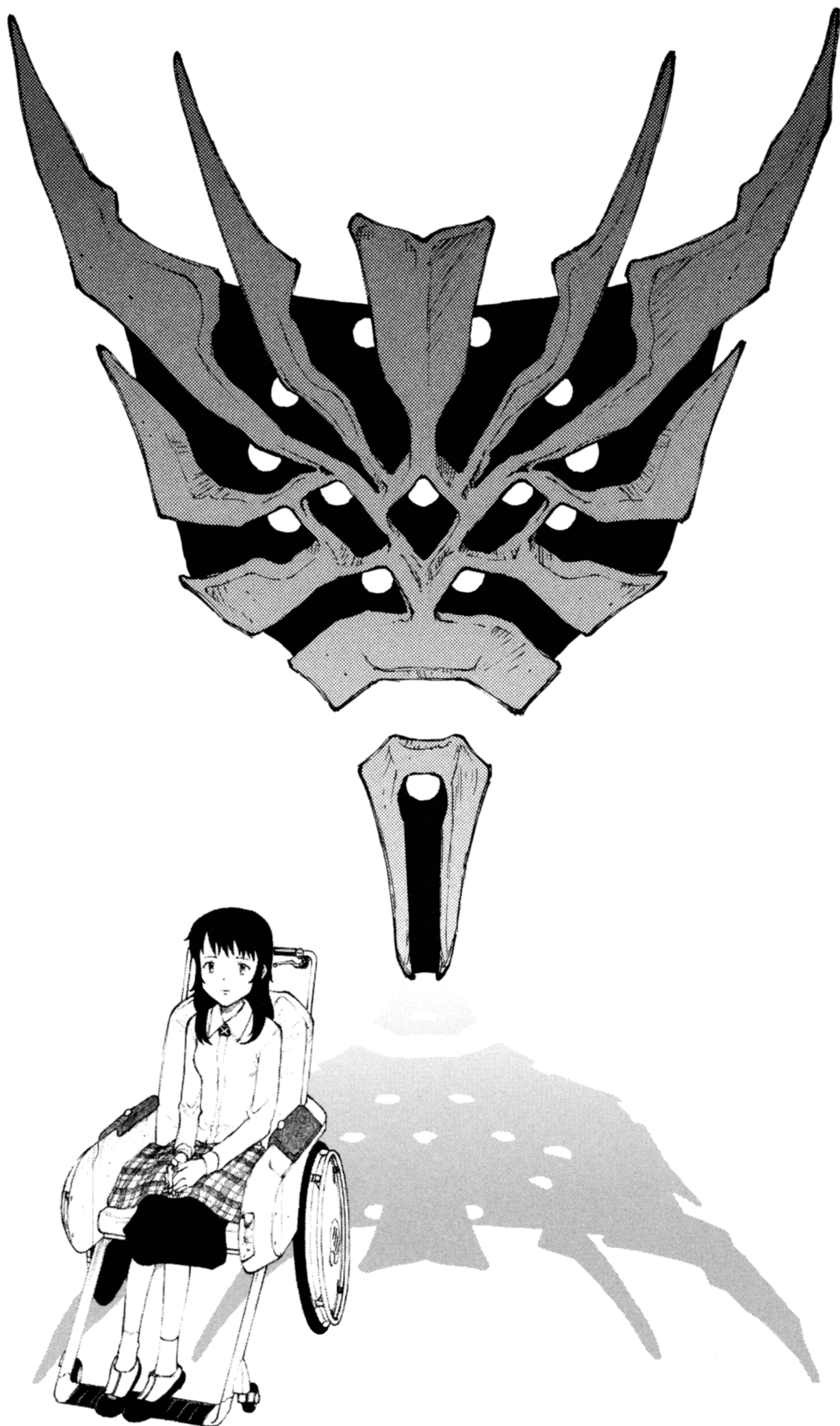
“Yeah, sure.”

Throughout the encounter, Waku had the feeling he’d met Kozue’s father somewhere, but he never discovered the reason for the feeling of déjà vu, and they went their own ways home. It was two weeks later, when reading his monthly soccer magazine that Waku came across the answer to what had been troubling him. His passion for soccer hadn’t waned even a little. He was flicking through a section on ‘former greats’ when he suddenly yelled, “I’ve got his autograph!”

It was Kozue’s dad! He’s a former pro soccer player who now manages a university veteran team.

Next time I see Kozue I'll definitely get her to introduce me. I'll get his signature. Waku was determined.

Quite apart from Waku's newfound desire, he and Kozue would be meeting much sooner than they expected.



Kozue Kurasaka was in the middle of elementary school when she began her life in a wheelchair. She fell from a tree in the playground trying to retrieve a stuck ball. At the time Kozue had been crazy for indoor soccer, cheered on by her dad. Active children at that age want to experience everything, and Kozue made one little slip up. But that unlucky blow meant the wheelchair would always be with her.

Of course, losing the use of your legs means there's a lot you can't do. But Kozue never — at least hardly ever — stopped to lament her misfortune. Instead Kozue was thankful for her good fortune. If she'd been born a hundred years earlier her disability would have been a much greater burden. Two or three hundred years later and perhaps someone like her wouldn't have been born.

It was two weeks since Nature School and Kozue was settled back into her normal daily life.

1:15 PM.

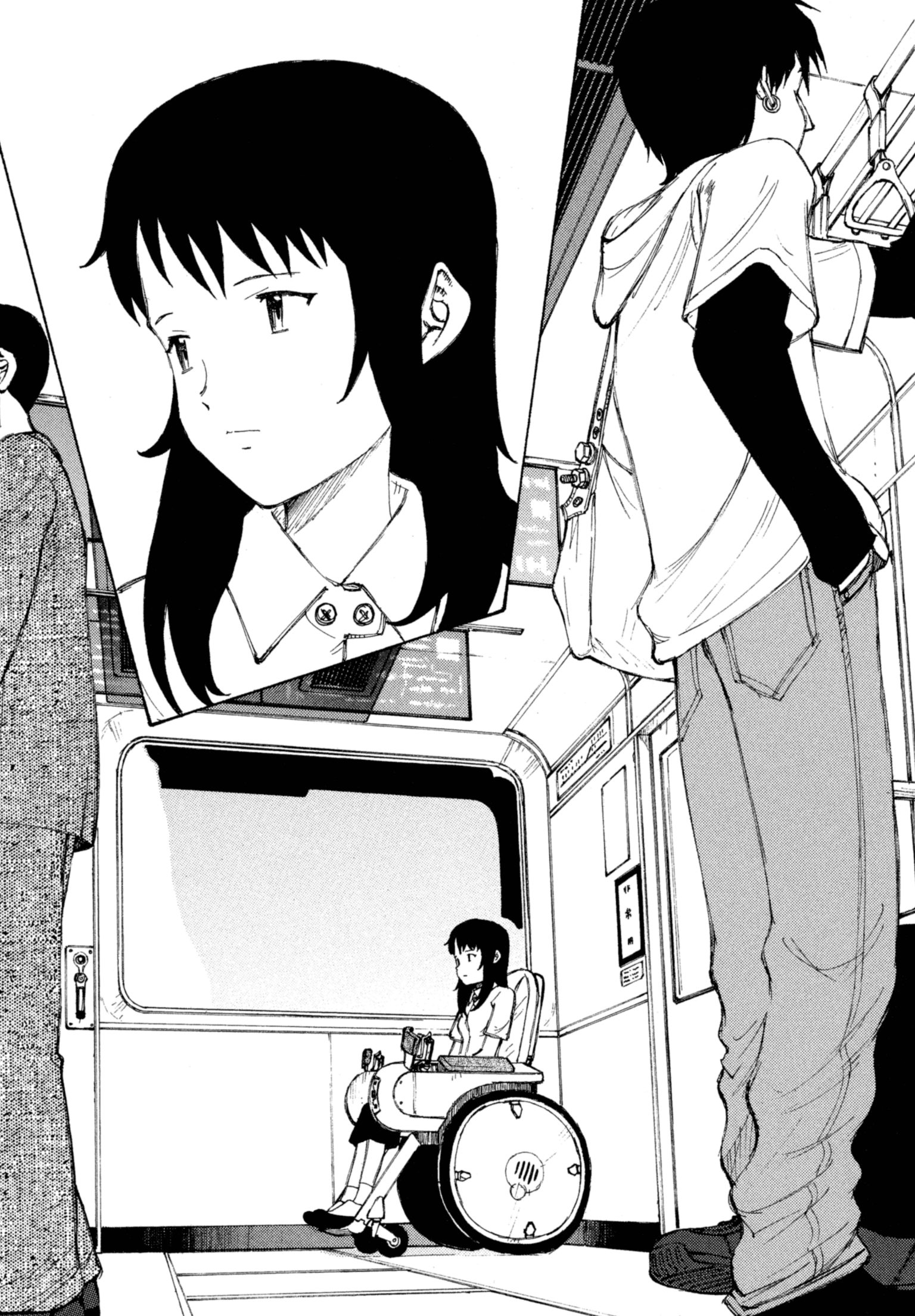
Kozue finished her lunch in the first floor dining room and took the elevator to the ground floor. She said farewell to her mom and left the house. Except for the stairs, the floors in Kozue's house were completely flat. Even with the wheelchair she could generally cope on her own. There were high taxes on petrol engines thanks to global warming and environmental regulations, so most vehicles were powered with electric motors. Kozue's wheelchair was one of the side benefits of those smaller and more efficient fuel cells.

The top speed — for use only in emergencies — was 30km/h, making it less a motorized chair and more like a car in the shape of a chair. The

fuel cell could even be charged at charging points in town, so Kozue could recharge right there in the street. The streets of Japan before Kozue was born were constantly torn up with utilities, often just to use up local authority budgets at the end of each year, and buckled pavements were the norm. The bumps and cracks were no problem for pedestrians, but for those in wheelchairs they presented a huge obstacle. Now, legislation meant paths are wide enough for Kozue to pass, and they were so flat even a ball placed on the ground wouldn't roll away. All in all Kozue's life wasn't so dissimilar to that of fully mobile people. The nearest station was close enough to reach on foot — or at a similar speed in the wheelchair. The ticket gates were wide enough to allow even Kozue's slightly larger wheelchair to pass. The platform could be reached by elevator.

The train slid into the station.

The gap between the train and the platform was no more than a centimeter, the step no more than two, and of course a space for wheelchair users was available in the lead carriage. Because of all this, Kozue considered that living with her disability involved no more effort and strife than anyone else. At times Kozue was deeply grateful for this fact. This was an age in which someone like her could take part in a Nature School on an isolated island. Of course she felt sorrow at the loss of use of her legs, but the whole country was set up to allow people like her to live their own lives. That isn't to say she didn't have inconveniences, but then nobody has it perfect. People who look healthy at a glance have to live with all manner of difficulties. It was the



excessive fretting over her all-too-visible handicap that was much more to her distaste.

What does it matter in the end, losing the use of my legs? I can do lots of things. And there are lots I want to do.

That was her attitude. Or... perhaps some of it was just a face. As the train rolled on, Kozue was lost in thought.

Last night... I finally heard Waku-kun's voice again. I only rang to check the number he gave me was right. Takashi Waku — the boy from the Nature School who took care of me.

Even on a remote island far from the mainland everything was arranged to support the daily needs of people with disabilities. But there would always be some things Kozue couldn't do. When everyone went to splash in the sea Kozue could only watch from the side-line. It was the kind of thing Kozue had to be pressured into anyway — which just made the boys all the more keen to persuade her — although she didn't exactly resist. In times like these it was always Waku that stayed by her side for company. He was a forward in the soccer team in elementary school. Actually, even though he seemed the type to be constantly on the move, whenever Kozue found herself alone he was always by her side.

And so they ended up talking to each other a lot — mainly about their times back in the soccer team. Waku would also push the wheelchair and look after her, but it was the fact he was there at all that made Kozue happy.

“I still haven’t finished my homework!” Waku blurted as soon as he answered Kozue’s call.

Well, he did keep slipping away whenever there was a break in classes at the Nature School.

Now Kozue had called he realized how little of the summer break was left and began to panic.

“You’ve only yourself to blame.”

“Yeah, I know...”

“But can you write that in kanji?”

“Umm... not really...”

Kozue was more the serious type and had finished her homework before Nature School started. Her grades were good and she was thinking of applying to a high school with links to a private college.

“Please help. I don’t get classics. Help me out Kozue-san.”

“Help me out Kozue-*sama*, don’t you mean?”

“Help me Kozue-*sama*.”

“Good. Now say it three times.”

“Help me Kozue-*sama*. Help me Kozue-*sama*. Help me Kozue-*sama*.”

“Turn round three times and bark.”

“...Woof.”

“...Did you really turn?”

And with that, despite totally neglecting his homework so far, Waku was finally guided through two hours of strict lessons on classics. “What’s so interesting about the Tale of Genji anyway?” Waku moaned, and Kozue offered to lend him the *shoujo manga* version. “I’ll come over and see you soon,” he said afterwards.

It would be good fun to see Waku-kun again.

“But only when you’ve finished the homework.”

It seemed like the call was over. Then Waku broached a new subject, “Oh, which reminds me... Why didn’t you tell me?”

Ah!

“Your dad was a soccer player?”

He found out.

This was what Kozue couldn’t tell him. Kozue’s dad was a genuine pro soccer player. While not such a famous player today, a soccer pundit would probably have heard of him. An unsung hero — that might be the right phrase. Even now he sometimes helps out coaching clubs or college teams to support his family. The house with its elevator and all manner of other enhancements, were all thanks to him.

“What does your family do, Kozue?”

Two weeks of Nature School was really such a short time.

That was how Waku first brought up the subject. But for some reason Kozue answered, “Oh, a normal office worker.” Waku wasn’t the only person she hid things from. Disembarking the ferry, Waku stayed with Kozue right to her lift home. As they drove home, naturally Kozue’s dad asked about him.

“Who was that kid?”

Such a silly question.

“A boy that looked after me.”

“He seems like a sporty type.”

Dad was sure to notice from Waku’s build.

“Yeah, he said he plays baseball.”

Again, Kozue played with the truth. She had to hide the fact he played in the soccer team because that would pique dad’s interest.

“What is it? Kozue?” Waku seemed concerned.

“Oh, nothing. Well, just that I thought it would surprise you so I didn’t say, and then there was never a chance to tell you.”

“Why do that? You’re so mean, Kozue.”

“I’m sorry. When you come to visit I’ll introduce you. I’m sure dad will be pleased as well.”

Somehow she’d managed to smooth things over.

The train stopped. The doors silently opened and the summer heat gushed into the car.

It was the middle of the day and only a few people were in the car. Nobody was waiting to board.

Why? Kozue asked herself. Why didn't I want Waku-kun to know about dad? Why didn't I want dad to know about Waku? I was afraid, she realized. But of what? Of me not being needed any more. By whom? Neither of them will need me. If I tell Waku about my dad then Waku won't be interested in me anymore. Or? If I tell my dad about Waku then my dad won't be interested in me anymore. What my dad really wants is a lively, healthy boy like Waku. Surely Waku really wants to hang out with other people, not just sit around with me.

Somehow this was all she'd been able to think about since the previous night.

I'm just being paranoid, she knew full well.

Like her father always said, "Don't obsess about my job. You have to live your own life."

I know he's right. At Nature School Waku-kun was always at my side laughing and joking. I know he can't be any other way. ...The problem is me.

Takashi Waku: boy, athletic, bright personality, some rough edges and lacking in various areas, but so very kind.

“What do you think of Waku-kun?” the girls at the Nature School used to ask.

If I had to say like or dislike, I guess I like him.

But the question tormented Kozue.

My feelings about Waku aren't really about liking, more... aspiration. He's everything I want to be.

To be born as a boy, to have no disability, no worries, to live positively. Perhaps... it isn't that I like Waku, but that I want to be Waku?

Somehow she couldn't shake the question from her head.

As she was wrestling with the issue the train arrived at her stop. She left the train and passed through the ticket gate. Her destination was a work facility for people with mental disabilities called “*Fureai Pan Studio Sunflower* (note: sounds like “Frying Pan Studio Sunflower” but means “Community Baking Studio Sunflower”). They sell bread made from low-pesticide Japanese wheat to public and educational institutions across the prefecture and its cities.

Kozue usually volunteered two days a week. Having said that, the actual baking of the bread requires particular skill, so Kozue wasn't allowed anywhere near that. Kozue's job was typically making price tags and signs, or routine tasks like clerical work. The facility was run by the city's NPO group. Kozue got involved after her father heard it had been set up and made a substantial donation.

She entered the building.

The room was brightly lit in a clean, uniform light. The aroma of baking bread floated on the air. They made more than 30 types of bread. This place was the real deal. It was the equal of any bakery in town. The person in charge had spent many years overseas working in baking. Their classical French breads were one of the specialties of local upscale restaurants, and of course Kozue's daily breakfast.

"Bread in support of people with disabilities." Kozue designed the leaflet along with her colleagues, which meant she'd had to compromise with the message. Without the message it would just be normal, good value, delicious bread.

Kozue noticed two strangers in the facility: a middle aged man and a younger man with a rough but smart appearance. He was carrying a camera.

Of course. The local press is coming to cover us today, Kozue remembered. As soon as Kozue realized who they were, they in turn noticed her.

Snap. The camera went off without as much as a hello. A member of the facility staff briefly introduced Kozue, explaining she was a regular volunteer.

Just then the younger man who seemed to be the photographer gave a simple "Hi" hardly worthy of calling a greeting, and rudely circled round Kozue clicking away at the camera. A photo of a young girl volunteering at the facility would probably end up making the article. Kozue knew how things like that worked. The suited reporter asked a few simple questions.

They were the kind of standard questions intended to elicit the answer the reporter wanted.

What do you think of the facility? I think it's a wonderful place.

How is the bread they make here? I think it's delicious.

And finally he summed up by saying, "Doing this even though you're disabled, you're an inspiration."

Always the same words. But Kozue despised those words.

Is it really my disability that makes volunteering here worthwhile? Of course not. So why does everyone see my legs and nothing else?

Why does everybody say that to me? "Doing this even though you can't walk, you're amazing." Why not talk about the things I've done? What sort of person am I that only my useless legs get mentioned? It feels like I'm trapped and bound by them. Just about everything wants to box me in. "A girl in a wheelchair did this." Amazing! "A girl in a wheelchair did this." Inspirational! If they looked at me as an individual they wouldn't bother to praise me at all. There are all sorts of people from the past with severe disabilities who achieved truly great things. Beethoven was a composer but could hardly hear at all. His music is still loved across the world, but that isn't because it's "music made by a disabled person."

Without realizing it, Kozue's thoughts were showing in her expression.

"Is... something wrong?" the middle-aged reporter said, concerned.

"Oh, no," Kozue gushed, smiling.

I know. This guy doesn't mean anything bad by it. I guess he really just wanted to praise me. Everyone that comes here is so kind. No, not just here. This world is so kind to me. Although I'm in a wheelchair I don't lose much freedom. I can get from home to here on my own. I'm so grateful to have been born into such a world. I live a very protected life. Maybe a little too protected. That's why I want to "repay" the world in some way. Why is the world so kind to me? Am I really worthy of being treated this way? I want to repay that kindness in my own way.

I'm always receiving things from the world. I hate that. I want to return the favor. I want to accomplish something for the world. Unless I do that, I don't feel I'll ever have an equal relationship with other people. I've always just had a longing to find "the me I really want to be" in other people. But that's no good. I'll achieve something on my own merits. I'll achieve something by myself without Waku-kun holding my hand. If I do that, I think then I'll be able to truly like Waku-kun. That's why I want to save the world. Up to yesterday the world was saving me. From today I, we, will save the world.

Privately but forcefully, Kozue was firmly determined.

It was three days before Kozue met Waku-kun and the others again.

Kozue was in her room getting ready to head off to the facility and was overcome with a feeling of dizziness.

And then.

She dropped.

“Ah!” A short shriek escaped her lips.

She was in... an empty white room.

The cockpit of that robot!

“Are you okay? Kozue?”

A familiar voice. Waku!

Kozue turned to find her 13 friends, the girl calling herself Maaya and the Koyemshi creature.

“What happened to your wheelchair?” Waku protested.

Up to now Kozue had been transported here along with her wheelchair but this time she was alone. That’s why she fell flat on her back when she arrived.

“Everyone is such a fuss pot. Fine, I’ll make a nice chair for you,” grumbled Koyemshi.

“Make?” asked Waku.

Waku looked around and seemed to notice something.

“Actually, there’s... nothing here...”

It’s true. There’s nothing in the room at all.

The only things present were the 15 children and the one unidentified creature.

The office chair used by Teacher from last time and the other chairs arranged in a circle around it had disappeared.

Maaya addressed the crowd, "Those chairs were the ones used by Teacher. Yours are being prepared now. Can you all picture your chairs for me?"

"Picture? What's going on?"

"Any chair you normally use is fine."

On hearing this, Kozue could naturally think only of her familiar wheelchair.

"Right. Then I'll take a little look-see at your primitive thought patterns." Koyemshi used its typical unnecessarily verbose figures of speech.

Then.

Then fourteen chairs suddenly appeared from thin air, just like the enemy had appeared from nowhere before.

"What?"

"Ah!"

"Wow!"

The boys were amazed.

Kozue: "Oh great," Kozue sighed with relief as her familiar wheelchair appeared. "I'll help you up," Waku and Mako lifted Kozue into the wheelchair.

Waku: "This chair is mine."

Kako: "Mine's here."

Kirie: "That's mine. Wow... it's exactly right, even where we replaced the screws."

Tsubasa: "I guess this is mine."

There was nothing special about the four chairs; they were just normal office chairs with casters.

Anko: "Here's mine." A stool.

Kanji: "This one." It was a black and aluminum two-tone, streamlined chair designed for ergonomics.

Kodama: "Whose is this executive chair?" "Ah, sorry. That's me," replied Kodama, raising his hand with embarrassment. "It belongs to my dad. I was just thinking about sitting in it and... up it popped."

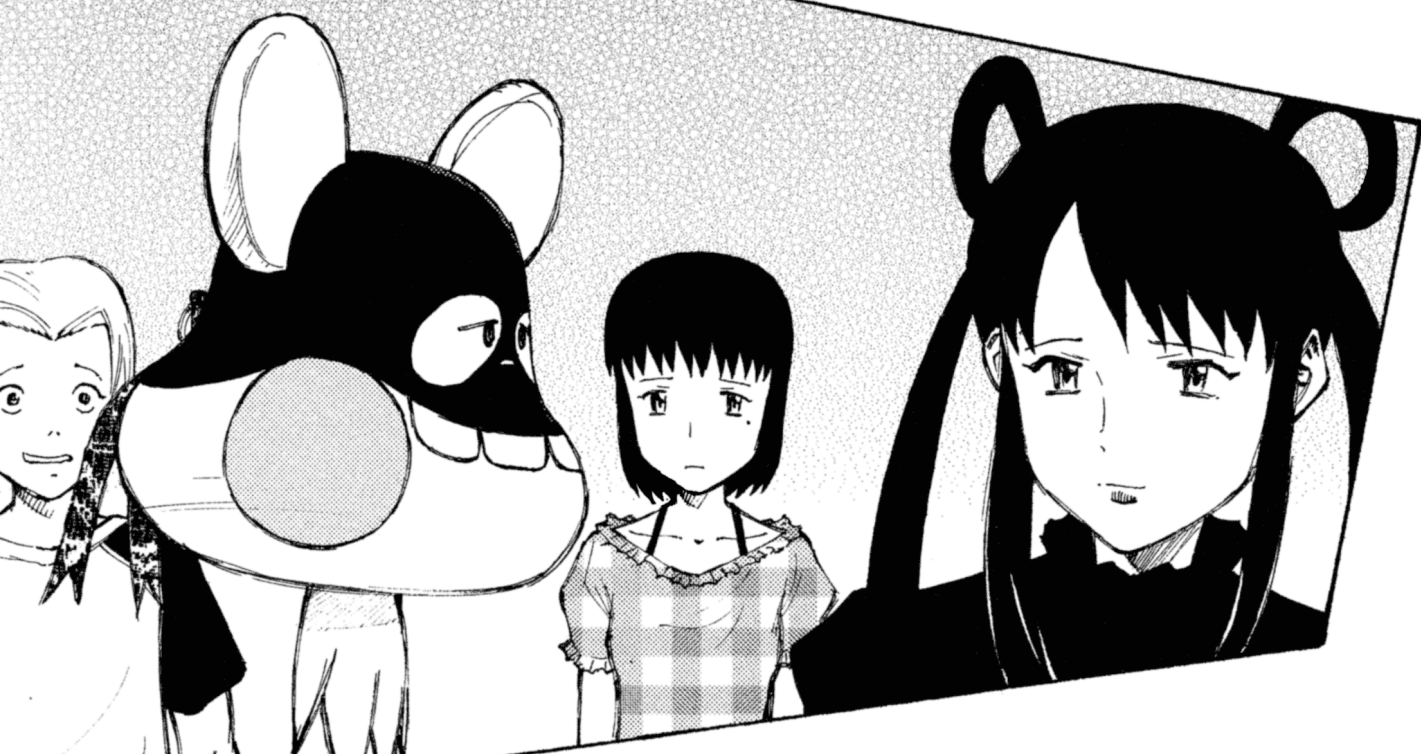
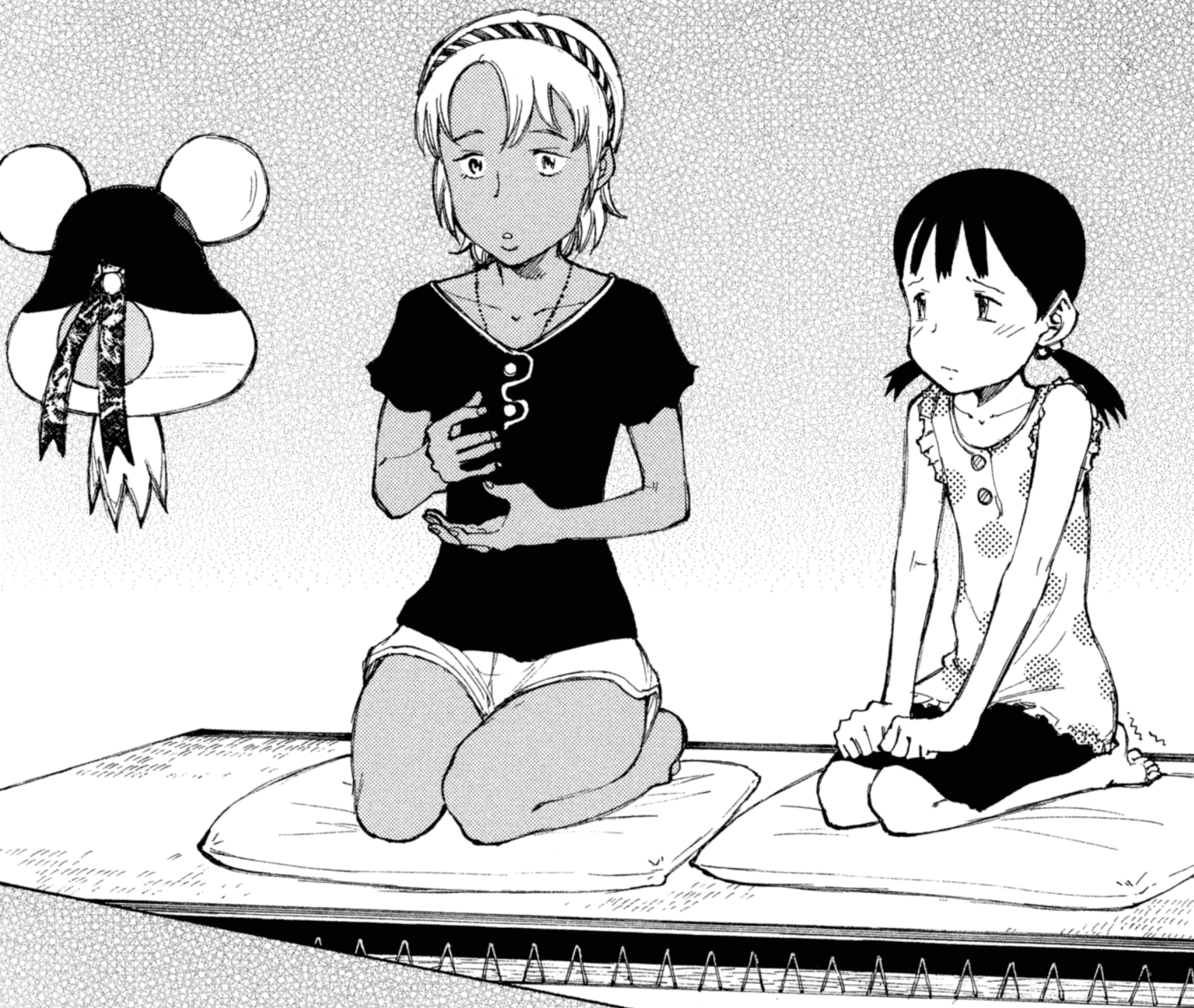
Chizu: A Scandinavian wooden chair.

Komo: A similar wooden chair, but antique.

Mako: "Wait a second. Who conjured up this baby bed?" "Ah, that would be me."

Ushiro: "Um, that one's a school chair..." "Whose is that? How sweet." Everyone's gaze fell on one person. "It's got to be Ushiro, right?" "What an imagination!"

Maria: "This is mine." A tatami... on top of which a cushion.



“Maria, you do realize that isn’t any kind of chair in Japanese, right?”

“*Hawaii? Why? Tatahmees* are so cool! A cushion on a *tatahmee*—that’s the traditional Japanese style!”

“She does her fake foreigner routine at the strangest times...”

Kana: The last one was a cushioned chair. “It’s pretty normal compared to Ushiro’s.” “Kana-chan, you mustn’t grow up to be like your brother.” Kana let slip a vague smile and sat on her chair.

Now all 14 had found their chairs, Maaya spoke up.

“So, you’ve all found your chair. Shall we get ready?”

“Wait,” Maria looked up, “where’s Maaya’s chair?”

There were 14 chairs, but 15 people. One was missing. Everyone’s gaze fixed on Maaya, the only one not sitting.

“I’m not contracted, remember? Chairs are only prepared for contractees. I’m here purely in a supporting role.”

“But we won’t be able to settle down if there is still somebody standing around,” Maria complained to Koyemshi.

“Yamada-kun, a cushion, please,” sighed Koyemshi.

“Yamada-kun? Who’s this Yamada-kun?”

“Oh, you know. Come on, we better give them one. These people are so self-obsessed.” the creature continued.

As if by magic, a cushion appeared in thin air and fell on Maria's head.

"Ow, that hurt!"

"So sorry. But that's what people who demand things without manners should expect."

Maria set the new cushion down next to her.

"Kana-chan, come sit next to your sis. You can swap places with the mystery girl. ...that's okay isn't it?"

"Sure. Thank you, you're so kind." Kana positioned herself on the cushion.

"Wait a second, take your shoes off. You can't wear shoes on tatami!"

"Oh, a real stickler," commented Ushiro.

Maaya sat herself in Kana's old chair.

"Koyemshi!" Maria piped up.

"What is it this time?"

"Can we get some tea and pastries?"

"Are you an idiot? Do you think yourself funny?"

"If you're on a tatami and cushion you need green tea and pastries. You are Japanese, aren't you?"

"I'm Koyemshi! Honestly! Do you people understand what you came here to do? This isn't a game!"

“I get it! I was just injecting a little fun, that’s all.”

“We’re going to fight the enemy. I know,” Maria continued, “So where is it anyway?”

“Right. As long as you know. The enemy is... here.”

The viewport opened to reveal a giant figure standing before them.

...The enemy.

A basic description would be a grey upright gorilla... an apeman? Its neck was embedded in its body and it was more rotund in shape, but otherwise it was generally humanoid.

“It’s a bit more normal-looking than the last one at least,” Waku opined frankly.

“But it sure does look pretty strong,” shivered Kako.

“So, we have to fight this time?” Waku asked Maaya.

“You said this thing moves by thinking?”

“Correct.”

“But there are 14 of us...”

Maaya explained, “Which one of you heard the voice? One person will serve as the pilot for each battle. Before each battle starts the Puppet’s voice will call to you.”

“Voice...?” Well I didn’t hear anything. Anyone?” Waku said with a look of disappointment, looking round at the others.

Kozue remembered. *A voice. I heard a voice.*

“It might be me.”

When her ferry came into port she had the feeling she heard someone call her name. Kozue timidly raised her hand.

“Um, it’s me. I’m not sure how but someone called my name.”

“Okay, you felt something. If it moves then you’re the pilot.”

Moves... how?

All that Kozue could think of was a long beam of light.

The destructive beam of light that tore through the beautiful blue evening sky in the last battle.

Then — *a shrill buzz* — a long beam of light shot towards the enemy.

“I’m... the pilot?”

“It would seem so. The fate of the world is in your hands. Are you ready?”

Maaya looked into Kozue’s eyes as she spoke. Her friends also gazed at her face. It was then that Kozue understood where her malaise had been coming from.

But... I can do this. I can. Today... with my own strength... today is the day I repay the world.

Kozue nodded. "I'm okay. I can do it."

She glared at the powerful enemy standing before her. The enemy's face seemed similar to before, with 10 slits.

Some of them were lit. Kozue thought they looked a little like eyes. Kozue stared directly into them.

I'm going to fight.

I'm going to save them.

The chair — wheelchair — Kozue was sitting in moved to the center, as if to confirm that she was the pilot.

"Right! Kozue, there's no point using the lasers," Waku said, "You'll have to close in on it first!"

He's right. I'll make no progress just swapping laser fire. I'll have to move closer first.

Just as Kozue was about to move.

"Wait! Don't move!" Mako's piercing voice stopped her in her tracks.

"Why not? The enemy's right there!"

"Where do you think we are?"

"What?"

For the first time Kozue, as well as the others, realized where they actually were. They hadn't noticed because of the enormous size of the

enemy, but they were standing in the middle of a city. It didn't seem much compared to the size of the Puppet and enemy, but high-rise buildings reached to around waist height. Amongst them an even taller red steel tower.

It's...

"Tokyo?"

"Yes, I don't know if any of this is real. But if it is real, and that is the real Tokyo, then there are people in that city down there." Mako screamed out a warning.

As she spoke, Kozue looked down at the sprawling city below. The line of sight appeared magnified as a separate screen. They could see a couple clinging to each other looking up in terror. Behind them, pedestrians were fleeing.

Suited office workers leaned out of windows and pointed up screaming. Looking down at the city from this giant's perspective made everything seem so small and unconvincing, like a miniature model. But emerging from the scene was the unmistakable sight of the city's inhabitants.

Kozue shivered.

If I just move a single step I'll wipe out all those people!

"If we fight here lots of people will die! Wait until they've all got away."

"Wait? Are you crazy? The enemy is right here! What are we supposed to do if it attacks?" Kako protested.

“But the enemy isn’t moving. We shouldn’t move until it does.” Mako countered.

Kozue’s laser shot was a direct hit. In fighting terms, hostilities have been opened, but this Apeman hasn’t budged an inch. “Maybe the enemy’s also waiting?” suggested Kanji.

“But for what? I mean, it is the enemy. Maybe it’s building strength ready for an all-out attack?” suggested Kodama.

Koyemshi piped up, “Ok. Don’t worry about squashing a few people down there. Tell Kozue-chan to defeat that enemy.”

“Fine? Kozue-chan, keep standing exactly where you are! If the enemy moves... then... then...” her words tailed off. Mako had nothing.

“O... okay,” Kozue replied.

But Maku’s warning planted a seed of doubt in Kozue’s heart.

Keep standing... how do I do that? It sounds so easy.

While a simple enough phrase, it was a fatal problem for Kozue.

I’m sitting in my wheelchair like always. But the robot is standing upright. Stand. I have to concentrate on standing. What am I supposed to do to keep it standing?

As if in response to her hesitation the Puppet suddenly began to shake. Then in a snap second the 500 meter giant began to tumble towards the sprawling city below. Countless tiny screams rose up. The cockpit rumbled, and then thudded into silence.

What's happened? I can't see.

“It's okay. The cockpit is a floating structure. An impact like that's no more than a soft toy to it.” Maaya's calm, distant voice completely missed the point.

Unable to bear the horror, Mako screamed, “Okay? How is it okay? All those people...!”

Unintentional, unconscious, unavoidable.

Kozue began to frantically look around her.

The Puppet automatically followed her line of sight. It focused in on a location from the pilot's consciousness, and the surrounding scene was thrust before the children's eyes.

And they saw.

Masses the size of skyscrapers were toppling. A scene of pandemonium unfolded beneath them in a disaster unknown to humankind. Countless buildings were crushed beneath the Puppet, not to mention the many surrounding buildings destroyed by the shock of the earthquake caused by the impact. Rubble cascaded down onto a bustling pedestrian mall. Mixed in with the rubble, like tiny grains of sand, were people, ground against the earth to a red paste.

A child who couldn't be more than 10 years old was crying. Sticking out from the rubble alongside was a woman's hand smeared with blood. The child's cries went unheard by the masses fleeing the devastation.

Everybody was trying to get away, but with no sense of where to run. Groups escaping to the west clashed with groups running to the east and descended into a fray. Above them, buildings began to crumble, permanently interrupting their nightmare.

A boy, gripped with panic, held a rod-shaped object and screamed. He was carrying... his own severed right arm. A girl beside him dragged something along as though on a string, staggering forwards. *Is that... her guts?*

Pile ups littered the roads, one car burst into flames. The fire spread to the others one by one. Drivers caught in the incident writhed around on the road.

The girls screamed. Others covered their mouths.

“Stop!”

“I... I... What...?” Kozue muttered, her face sheet white.

Her hands shook and her teeth chattered.

“Get a grip Kozue!”

“Get the hell up!”

The gruesome scene had shaken the group of friends to their cores. Their response took the form of pouring admonishment upon Kozue.

“I’m sorry! I... I...”

“It’s okay.”

“Just try to stand!”

Try to stand.

I just have to imagine it and it moves, so if I can just imagine “stand.” It’s so simple.

For anyone except Kozue.

The Puppet’s long arms thrust down into the city. Another block erupted in noise and collapsed, but Kozue had no room to notice it. The Puppet’s upper body began to rise.

“That’s it. Good. Come on.”

Now she concentrated on being aware of the legs. They began to stand... staggered... and collapsed.

Another disaster.

Suddenly, the enemy which had remained still so far began to move. It began to walk in their direction.

“It... it’s coming this way!”

“We’ll get beaten!”

“The lasers! Use the lasers, quick!”

“Yes!”

A multi-beamed laser shot out from the collapsed black Puppet towards the grey Apeman, but mostly just bounced off its armor. Some flew up

into the sky, but some were deflected downwards, adding to the devastation.

Step after step, the Apeman drew closer to the collapsed and unmoving Puppet.

Boom.

Boom.

Each step it took caused a slight vibration in the cockpit.

Several people recalled the last battle where the situation was reversed. The Spider used its electric shock in vain as the Puppet approached, before being smashed. The current situation seemed a complete role reversal.

“No, no, no... don’t come this way...” Kozue still couldn’t get up and continued firing laser volleys in futile resistance.

We’re done for. We’re hardly hurting the enemy. It’s going to pummel us.

The cockpit was filled with the booming steps. The effect of fire on the Puppet was marginal, but the inevitability of the approaching vibrations was dawning on the children.

“We’re going to die! Kozue! Stand up quickly! Quickly!” Kako yelled.

Panic. Kozue covered her ears and shut her eyes to try to block out their impending fate.

Dumbstruck. Her eyes darted around in fright.

Dead-eyed stare. The white room descended into chaos.

Enough...

“Quiet!” Waku thundered, “Try to put yourself in Kozue’s place! You can’t just tell her to stand and expect her to just be able to do it!”

The room fell silent for a brief second.

“So what do we do?”

“If we stay like this we’re mincemeat!”

Waku’s intervention briefly stabilized the mood.

Waku stood up silently. He walked over to Kozue as she curled up in desperation on the wheelchair and gently held her tightly clenched left hand.

“Open your eyes Kozue.”

“W... what?”

“It’s okay. Just try to imagine it. I’ll do it with you. If someone does it with you it’ll work. You don’t have to do this on your own, I’m here with you.”

Kozue closed her eyes.

Waku-kun is holding my hand. It’s just like always. I can’t stand up on my own, but I can if someone helps me up. And just like always Waku-kun is here for me.

Alright. I’m okay. I can do this. I can fight.

The Puppet rumbled... and stood.

“Yes!”

“But... the enemy!”

“Kozue, open your eyes.”

The enemy! It's right there! It's almost upon us!

“That's the enemy. We have to defeat it. You can do it, Kozue.”

Kozue looked up at Waku, her eyes full of fear. Waku put his hand in his pocket and took something out for Kozue.

“Take this.”

A key? No, something else...

He passed her an old worn out ball-shaped key chain. The surface had mostly peeled off and areas of skin-colored rubber were visible, but from the remaining colors Kozue could tell it was supposed to be a soccer ball.

“A good luck charm. It helps me win. I carry it at every match. Whenever I hold this and make a wish before a match I'm guaranteed to win. If I forget to make the wish I always lose,” Waku explained.

“Make a wish! And win!”

How childish. A good luck charm. How silly to compare this situation with a soccer game. This situation... The approaching enemy and the city we destroyed. All those stolen lives.

Surrounded by all this, the girl who had just learned to stand would have to depend on a wish to survive.

Grasp. Wish. And win.

The enemy raised its arms and lunged forwards. In that instant...

The Puppet's right arm swung forwards and landed an audacious blow on the enemy.

This Puppet is strong... Maaya was telling the truth. The enemy was first to start its attack but we landed the blow first. The arms on the Puppet do seem longer...

Whether because of reach or whatever reason, the speed of the attack proved an overwhelming success. The bearing on the enemy is determined by a function of mass and speed. In a fight between opponents of equal build, speed determines who wins and loses.

So... this Puppet really is strong.

"You did it!"

"Come on!"

Move the leg forwards...

Kozue was walking.

A little further...

With each step dozens of rows of buildings were trampled, and ten times as many lost their lives.

Kozue had no time to think about that now.

Defeat it. Defeat the enemy, was all she could think.

Again she raised the right arm and punched. Punch after punch. The enemy stood at a distance, then began to move away.

“Is it running?”

“What do we do if it runs away?”

“It seems to be heading for the sea...”

“Why?”

“Maybe it has a special move that draws power from the water.”

“Stop it Kodama. Get real.”

The boys pondered the change in behavior.

“Actually it seems more like its leading us to the sea,” Kanji remarked.

It sure seems that way, thought Kozue.

“Kozue, go after it.”

“Ok.”

Right foot forward. Now the left. Take it steadily, one step at a time. The trampled city... and the people... I mustn't think about it.

“Maybe it's because it's hard to fight with poor footing.”

“Do you think?”

The Puppet's enormous size meant buildings were like weeds compared to its footprint.

That's why it's causing so much damage. Anyway, the enemy's moving towards the coast now.

"Maybe the enemy also wants to avoid damaging the city..." Kirie said nervously.

"Don't be silly! It's the enemy! Think about it!" Kako yelled.

But... Kozue thought. Actually, the enemy's gait seems a little odd. When we attacked before I thought it might be injured, but maybe it was trying to avoid destroying the city. I destroyed the city more than it did. Which one of us is really protecting the world here? Kozue was battling with her thoughts.

"Kozue, just concentrate on defeating that thing. Give it everything. Don't worry about anything else!" Waku urged.

"Ok," Kozue nodded.

She held the charm tight in her right hand and squeezed Waku's hand just as tight with her left.

The fight moved into the ocean. Kozue raised her right arm.

The Apeman positioned itself to dodge the next head on punch from the Puppet. It circled round to the side just out of reach of the right arm and delivered a concentrated volley of laser fire. Kozue turned to face it and raised her arm to punch, but again it backed away and let loose with the

lasers. Perhaps it realized it was at a relative disadvantage with the previous tactic. It seemed like a flyweight boxer using his speed as a weapon to fight a heavyweight. In the last battle the Puppet piloted by the Teacher had been able to easily kick the Spider, so a lack of speed wasn't necessarily a problem. But the pilot this time was Kozue, a girl who had forgotten how to walk many years ago but was now standing and moving, and more than that involved in a fist fight. But this was taking all her effort; it was her limit, and it wasn't enough. It looked as though the enemy had incurred some damage due to the earlier tactic, and perhaps one or two more blows at full strength would have put an end to things. But those blows would not come. On the contrary the enemy's sporadic attacks were working against the Puppet.

Blow by blow, little by little, the armor was being surely worn away.

The Puppet raised its right arm.

The Apeman circled and returned laser fire.

The Puppet raised its right arm.

The Apeman circled and returned laser fire.

The Puppet raised its right arm.

The Apeman circled.

The Puppet raised its right arm.

The Apeman circled and returned laser fire.

Each time the cycle repeated the Puppet inched closer to defeat.

“Damn it! What now?” Waku muttered.

No idea.

What should I do?

The enemy came forward.

Kozue let out her right arm, only again to hit empty space.

Then more laser fire.

Suddenly, “Kozue!”

Maria, who had so far held back from commenting, raised her voice.

“Do you want to win?”

It was an unexpected question. How could it be relevant to the current situation?

“What?” The dubious voices of the others interrupted her, then Maria continued.

“I’m asking Kozue. Do you want to win by any means possible?” she asked with a look of seriousness.

The usual insolent, rough-and-ready Maria took on an indescribable expression. Kozue caught her gaze, and replied, “I do.”

Having heard this, Maria looked distressed and said, “I see. In that case... use Tokyo as your shield.”

Everyone was dumbfounded.

“What are you saying? That would be... More people would...” Kako retaliated.

“That’s why I asked if you wanted to win at all costs. Listen. The enemy is moving just outside our area of attack, dodging our attacks and firing lasers. But sometimes the enemy doesn’t attack despite its perfect timing. It made me think. Why doesn’t the enemy attack, and why did it originally come out to sea in the first place. There can only be one reason. It wants to protect the city. It is the enemy and we have to fight it no matter what, but we don’t know its objectives. If it’s invading maybe there’s something in Tokyo it wants. I don’t know what, but for whatever reason the enemy is trying to protect Tokyo. That’s why, Kozue, you should use Tokyo as a shield. Maybe then the enemy will stop firing its laser. You might be able to land a direct punch on it as it tries to avoid damaging the city.”

Boom. Another powerful laser impact.

Again, the Puppet was hit by the enemy’s fire.

“It’s a coward’s way out and it isn’t certain to work, but we’re at a massive disadvantage here so we have to at least try to break the deadlock.”

Try...

But if we lose even more people will lose their lives.

“If the enemy is an invader, even more people will die unless we take it down. It’s a necessary sacrifice. But you have to decide, Kozue. Of course it would be best if we could win without putting anyone’s life at

risk, without any sacrifice. But unfortunately that's not a choice you have. Somehow you have to defeat that thing."

"Don't be so mean." Several of the girls protested, but Kozue quietened them, "It's ok." She looked at Maria and saw from her pained expression that she understood what the words meant.

Okay. It's my decision. I want to defeat the enemy.

"Waku-kun, let go of my hand."

"Wh..."

"It's okay. I can stand by myself now."

Yes. I'm taking a gamble, fighting for the fate of the world. Right now I'm the only one who can protect the world. Will the world be lost for fear of sacrifice? Can I save the world without sacrifice? Only I can make that decision.

Kozue made the Puppet retreat as though dodging the laser attacks coming in from the enemy. Behind her was Tokyo.

The enemy's fire ceased.

"The attacks have stopped..."

Still without firing, the enemy circled round to Kozue's side. It was clearly trying to get Tokyo out of the firing line. In response Kozue took another step backwards. Then the process repeated.

Each time it was repeated the Puppet and the Apeman drew closer, step by step, to the shore. The enemy then stopped trying to circle round to the side. It clearly feared destroying the city in which Kozue and the others lived. This meant the Apeman had only two options. It could fire its lasers, even though this would cause some damage to the city, or it could avoid all collateral damage and go back to point blank direct attacks.

The enemy didn't move. It was as though it was weighing up its two options. A minute passed.

The Apeman moved again. It squared up to the Puppet and raised its right arm high above its head. Keeping that stance, it charged.

The Apeman had chosen the second option.

"Look out!"

"Come on, Kozue!"

But there was no need for encouragement.

Kozue charged.

"Uaaaaaaaahhhh!"

Kozue screamed as the Puppet lunged forwards. The full weight of the Puppet fed into a straight right punch. The Puppet's needle-like right arm and the Apeman's huge rock-like right arm struck head on. The Apeman's right arm crumpled and shattered.

"Way to go, Kozue!"

“Yes! We can do it! We can win!”

Another blow struck the enemy, already staggered by the loss of an arm.

“Look! I can stand on my own!”

It was a direct hit. The armor smashed and the point pierced the enemy’s torso. She pulled the right arm back and brought in the left.

“I’m... fighting... using my own strength!”

And again with the right.

The battle had been brought to a close.

We won.

The Puppet stood with its feet half in the water, and the destroyed enemy lay stretched out. The Puppet slowly turned and looked over its shoulder.

Tokyo.

The city Kozue had protected. The city that had shielded Kozue. The city Kozue had destroyed. The battle was over. But even now black smoke billowed up across the city. Many lives had been lost... and many more were still being lost. Kozue’s expression soured as she looked on. There was no joy in this victory.

“Can we go outside?” Kozue squeezed the voice from her throat. “I want to see what we’ve done with my own eyes.”

“That’s fine, but your chair can’t be transported from here,” said Maaya.

“That’s okay. I’ll help you,” said Waku.

“Okay,” Kozue nodded.

There was a perfectly flat area just at the nape of the Puppet’s neck. The city was destroyed. They looked down on the city as though from the clouds. It looked like a mirage. But Waku knew people were still down there as the black smoke continued to billow up. He was snatched away from the scene by the girl holding his hand next to him. The faces of Kozue’s friends were anything but warm. The capital of their nation was engulfed in flames, utterly destroyed. It looked as though an earthquake had struck. It was clear they thought it wasn’t their fault; it was Kozue’s fault.

“Waku-kun, I... I did everything I could,” Kozue whispered.

Kozue sighed.

Waku felt more than ever that he had to protect Kozue.

The battle has only just started. I have to help her through this.

As he thought, he held Kozue’s hand all the more tightly.

“Let go of my hand,” Kozue said abruptly. “I think I might be able to walk by myself.”

“Oh... okay,” Waku was confused.

Is she alright?

But Kozue's voice sounded so sure. Waku let go. As he did so he expected her to immediately fall to the ground, but, somehow, Kozue simply stood. Undoubtedly, she was unsteady on her feet, but she was standing, without anyone's help. Then, Kozue took a single step upon the Puppet's shoulder.

Then, Waku saw.

Kozue Kurasaka stood on her own two feet and walked.

Then, Waku saw.

Kozue Kurasaka fell.

She bounced several times down the black armored plating, and cascaded down 500 meters into the ocean.

Waku jumped forward to help, but she was gone, and the Puppet's shoulder was so high it was impossible to see where she had landed.

Waku was in his room.

How long has it been... did I fall asleep...

He noticed the calendar. August was nearly through. To Waku, that meant only one thing — the deadline. On his desk his nemesis seemed to swell before his eyes into a mountain of work — classics.

That's why I had such bad dreams — I was sleeping on top of all these.

Kozue... falling...

Downstairs the telephone rang. The sudden noise gave Waku a start. It was for him. His mom answered and called his name.

Waku pressed the share button on the second handset, suppressing a foreboding feeling.

“Hello.”

“Oh, Tsubasa, hello.”

“Where are you?”

“Just at home.”

“You didn’t have a dream did you?”

Waku shivered, despite the summer heat.

Is the air conditioner on high again?

Tsubasa continued, “Did you ride that robot and fight again?”

“That... was a dream...”

“I’m not sure. Kozue-chan’s cellphone number... do you have it? You’re her classmate so I thought I’d try you.”

As Waku put down the handset he felt markedly anxious.

“Mom... there was nothing on the news about a monster in Tokyo, right?”

His mother laughed, “What? Monster? What have you done now?” she teased, assuming it was some kind of joke.

Exactly. That sort of thing doesn't happen. That thing was just a dream. Bah, I'm worried about a thing from a dream. I was the hero. We used a giant robot to save the world. To think something might have happened to Kozue just because of that... it wasn't real. And the idea that something like that happened to Tokyo... impossible. It was a dream.

And then he remembered.

In the dream I gave my good luck charm to Kozue.

He searched through his pockets.

It was nowhere to be found.

The telephone rang again. He made a wish and picked up on the third ring.

“They said Kozue didn't come home. They have no idea when she even went out.”

What?

Waku frantically searched for reasons Kozue wouldn't have come back.

“She just went out somewhere...? Does Kozue just go out on her own like that?”

“That's just it. Her wheelchair was still in her room...”

What the hell? So, somehow Kozue must have gone outside... I know! Koyemshi must have teleported her... No! That's crazy. That was a dream.

Waku's thoughts swirled round and round and he said nothing.

Uncomfortable with the silence, Tsubasa started again, "Waku-kun, you have a laptop, right? What's your email address?"

Waku spelled out the address and shortly afterwards ended the call. In his inbox was a single image file. A red tower. It was quite a bit taller than the surrounding buildings.

I saw this... The dream. I saw this in the dream. But is there such a building in Tokyo?

He calmly tried to think but couldn't come up with anything. The Tokyo skyline came up on TV on an almost daily basis.

Tsubasa called again.

"Well? We saw this, right?"

"Umm..."

"It's called Tokyo Tower. It's a communications tower. They used it for broadcasting analog TV signals."

"So what's weird about that?"

"Well, it was pulled down 20 years ago."

"What?"

"When TV became digital they didn't need it anymore and then it got run down. It was a classic example of old Tokyo so there was a campaign to restore it, but eventually it was dismantled."

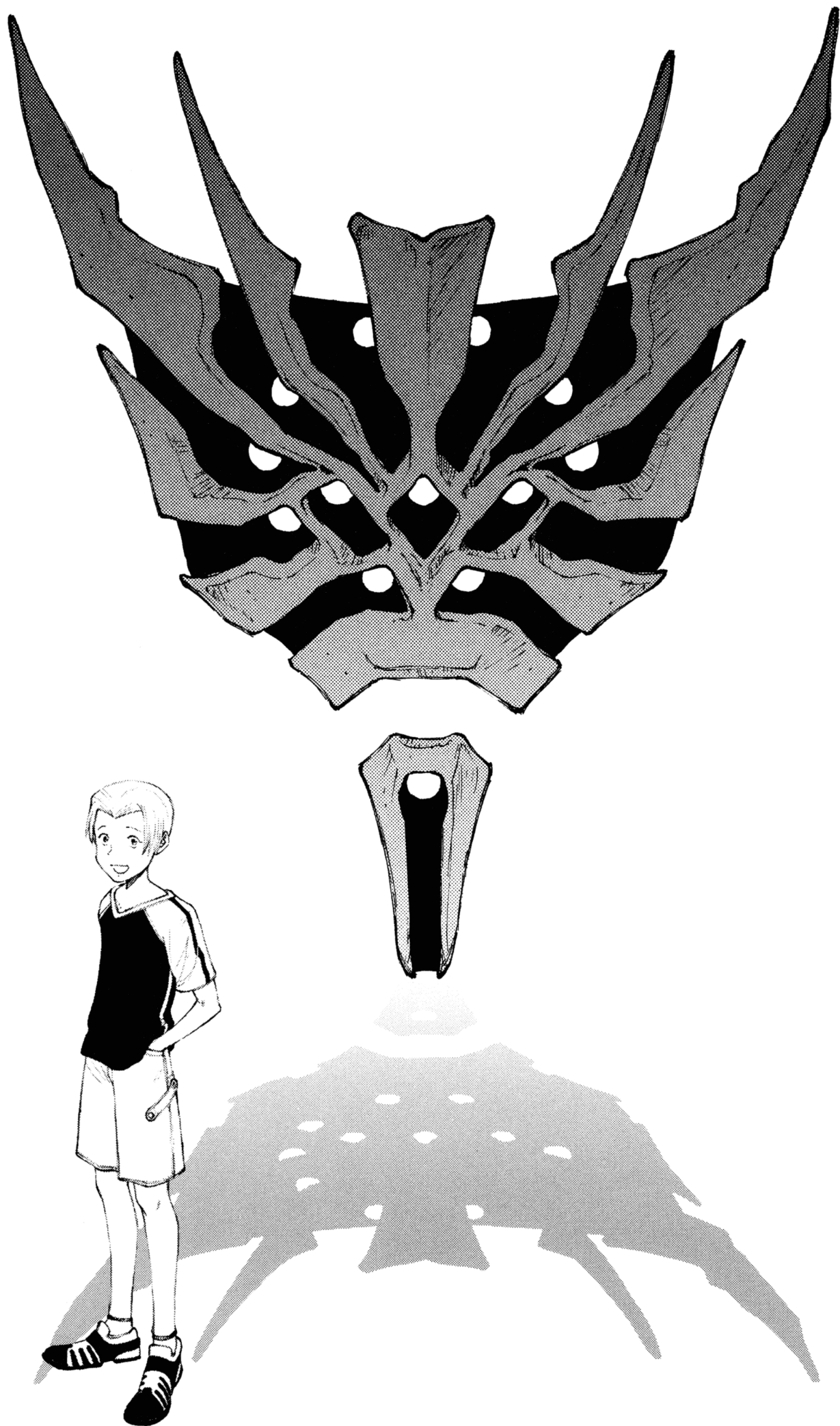
“So... what?”

“So... the place where we had the battle couldn’t have been the Tokyo of today. It can’t have been the real one. But... well...”

But Kozue had really disappeared from her home.

Couldn’t she have just gone out? Waku repeatedly asked himself.

But that day Kozue didn’t return home, and the next day Waku heard her family had started an official search.



There's a thing called the POS system. It's something cash registers in convenience stores have. Basically, it automatically adds up what and how much the store has sold. It increases orders for products which sell well or are sold out, and reduces orders for things which aren't selling, and it does this essentially automatically. More of the products that sell, less of those that don't.

It's so obvious. It'd be great to have more yakisoba rolls and curry donuts that sell out after 10 minutes, and fewer of those bread rolls that nobody buys. The TV show said the system is everywhere these days, commonplace. It said it used to only be used in convenience stores and supermarkets, but it's in every corner store now, right across the world. Why not use it in a middle school store? Why don't we at least have a proper register? I mean, what age are we living in here: an old women playing with an abacus and fiddling with small change? It isn't me being weird. It really isn't me.

Kako thought to himself over the 73 seconds it took, from the window seat second from the back in the first floor classroom, for him to push his way along the corridor and down the stairs after the end of class.

The window seat was a pain. He was happy at first when he was switched to it, but being so far from the corridor isn't a good thing in his current circumstances. Again the Class B judo club are waiting at the back door of the classroom (*why do they have to eat together?*), losing him precious seconds. Kako rushed down the stairs, through the connecting passage and into the new canteen block. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays were no problem. The problems were Mondays and Thursdays.

Mondays and Thursdays. And today is Monday. Stupid Mr. Murakami with his modern Japanese class. He has a habit of adding extra work if we're late to class — to everyone, that is, even if just one person is late — and so he just calmly extended class. It's right at the start of term but now he's made me five minutes late. Two or three minutes might be okay, but more than that won't fly. It definitely won't fly. Damn you, Mr. Murakami. I swear I'll beat the life out of you one day.

Kako thought to himself over the 62 seconds it took for him to race from his classroom in the old block to the ground floor store in the new block.

Made it!

It was a full on sprint. The time was 2 minutes 15 seconds, casually breaking his record. But, adding on the class extension time, 5 minutes and 23 seconds, gave a potentially fatal total of 7 minutes and 38 seconds. The problem was the yakisoba rolls. Yakisoba rolls, as the name suggests, are basically yakisoba in a sub roll. The bread is a normal roll, and the yakisoba is everyday yakisoba. But, by some magic, putting the two together produced an exquisite taste. It must be that this wasn't mere yakisoba, but yakisoba made to be put in a roll; this wasn't a mere roll, but a roll made to hold yakisoba. And so, the school store's yakisoba rolls were feted by the pupils as a supreme delicacy.

So, for Kako, the important part starts now. Clearly, this was the most popular product of the lineup, and it will without doubt sell out at 27 minutes past 12. One of the seven wonders of the school was that this time had not changed in 10 years.

Kako didn't know whether the 10 years rumor was true, but it certainly hadn't changed in the half year he'd been there.

Kako had to buy three yakisoba rolls, as well as a few side snacks and three packs of milk, but they were less of a problem.

In the end Kako failed in his mission to buy the rolls.

Despite this, the only punishment Kako received was to be forced to eat the bread rolls — the ones he'd bought in place of the yakisoba rolls — thrown on the ground behind the gymnasium. Kako's good fortune came via his friend, Kirie Yosuke, who had anticipated his plight and bought Kako's yakisoba rolls after class, and given them to *them* already.

"Hey, Kako! You know you're only positive feature is your speed, right? What would you do if you were slower than piggy? You should thank him! Thank piggy! Otherwise you'd be worse than a pig. What would you have for lunch now if it weren't for piggy?"

One of *them* would start by making a remark and then they'd play off each other's taunts.

Shut up! Dumb punks. They know Mondays and Thursdays are difficult. It should have been Kirie's turn. They forced me into this against my will. It's their lunches — why should I have to worry about it.

Kako kept his real thoughts to himself. He was a fair bit smaller than them, so he had to finesse his real response. This was Kako's worldly wisdom.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

They spat out their last jibes.

“People don’t eat with pigs! We’re going up on the roof.”

“And don’t let us down again!”

“Let’s go to karaoke.”

And they left, leaving Kako and Kirie alone.

Without Kirie’s quick wittedness he was sure to have gotten a beating, or even a dunking in the toilets. A few words of thanks might have been appropriate. Instead, Kako glared at Kirie.

“Why?”

“W... what?” His hesitant manner triggered Kako’s inferiority complex.

Did he save me from those punks? He made a fool out of me right in front of them. I’m supposed to be lower than him?

Kako frantically berated himself.

“Hey, Piggy! You know you aren’t as quick as me! Why didn’t you bring the rolls straight to me? Everything would’ve been fine then! Use your head!”

“B... but...”

“What? But nothing!”

“Ando-kun’s gang know people in your class.”

“So what?”

“So they’d find out that you were late. So they’d know what I did and that you were lying, and... it would have been even worse.”

“Oh...”

He was right.

Kako finally saw it from the other perspective.

I was just caught up in the idea that Kirie got the rolls quicker than I did. But he had it all worked out.

“Don’t imagine things! You don’t know for sure... It might have been...”

Kako couldn’t acknowledge Kirie’s help, and lashed out with his frustration.

A few seconds passed in silence, and then Kirie said, “I’m sorry. Come on, eat up.”

The arena of middle school was a world of violent conflict. A group of people have no choice but to be in a certain place at a certain time for the unimaginably long period of three years. It was a cruel hierarchical society. Some people lived each day to the full, laughing and joining in club activities, while others lived a dark life unimaginable to them. When was it that Kako started down that dark path?

“Your only positive feature is your speed.”

In elementary school he was unbeatable in the 500m sprint, and he was chosen for the interclass relay.

Kako was the class hero, so when did he start being the guy who can only run. Maybe even the tallest guy in class is eventually overtaken by everyone. The center of the class gets everyone's attention and support. Maybe it was the experience of that pleasant feeling, once, as a child that had led to his current unhappiness. Once again his thoughts returned to the same situation.

When he entered middle school he saw it as a chance. He was desperate to make friends with people who stood out, but inevitably ended up being their slave.

He looked at Kirie.

He doesn't seem as unhappy with his circumstances. Maybe it suits him to be forced to run around for them. But I'm different. I've been chosen. Why do I...

Something came into Kako's mind.

The dark giant. The 500 meter robot — the Puppet. The righteous ally of justice saving the world from attacking enemies.

And I'm its pilot. That means I...

"I got a call from Chizu yesterday. She said Kozue-chan disappeared."

"What?" Kirie's words brought Kako back to the real world. "You talk on the phone with Chizu...?"

To Kako, who had a crush on Chizu, this was the important part.

“She said Kozue-chan... disappeared. She’s officially missing...”

Hearing it the second time, Kako finally took in the words.

“Chizu heard it from Tsubasa-chan, but... since that day — the day we had the same dream — she’s been nowhere to be found...”

“No way!”

That dream. Sitting in a giant robot and fighting over Tokyo. Then Kozue became the pilot, and fell from the 500 meter robot into the sea after the battle.

If Kozue didn’t come back, the meaning is clear. The dream that day was...

“So it’s true. It was real.” Kirie’s voice was downhearted, quite unlike Kako’s.

“It’s true! We’ve been chosen! We’re soldiers fighting to protect the earth.”

“But then, what about Kozue-chan?”

Kako finally realized what had happened to Kozue. If it was real, if their dream that day was reality, then Kozue’s death was also real.

“But...”

Kako didn't have much of an impression of Kozue. She was always with that kid Waku. She used a wheelchair. That was about it. If he had to say more, honestly, it was that she was a burden.

When just one person in the group can't walk it makes it difficult to coordinate, he'd thought more than a few times.

Kako thought for a moment and said, "But... it was for the best, no?"

"For the best?"

"Think about it. Her... Kozue's battle. She couldn't even walk, never mind fight. We have to win, to save the earth. So, it's bad for Kozue but it couldn't be avoided."

"Couldn't be avoided?"

"Well, I mean, if we have to protect the earth."

"I..."

As Kako spoke, Kirie seemed to want to object.

Suddenly, Kako heard it.

— Isao Kako —

Who's calling my name...

"Congratulations."

Clapping.

Before he knew it, there she stood — the girl dressed in black.

“Maaya...”

Along with her floating sidekick.

“And Koyemshi! Don’t forget Koyemshi.”

“W... where did they come from...”

“Did someone call me?” asked Kako.

“Call? You heard it? So does that mean...”

“Indeed. It was a shame about Kozue-chan. But as she is no longer with us, the Puppet needs a new pilot, and that’s you.” Maaya’s finger pointed to Kako.

“Really?! I get to pilot it?”

“Yes,” Maaya nodded. “You are the pilot of the Puppet. At least for as long as you last.”

“Ok, then!” Kako clenched his hands.

He made a big show of shaping his whole body into a heroic pose.

“Right! It’s time! I’ll take this thing and defend the earth!”

“Yes. You’ll defend the earth.”

Kako cheerfully glanced across to Kirie.

“May I ask a question?” Kirie asked quietly.

“What? Come on, she’s the same age as us. You don’t have to be all respectful.”

“Well...” He hesitated a few seconds, as though he feared the answer to his question. And then he asked, “What happened to Kozue-chan?”

“She died,” said Maaya without hesitation.

It was cold and blunt, just like the incident the day before.

“Wha...”

“Changing to a new pilot means the previous pilot died. It’s a shame but that’s how it is.”

Cold words.

“Hey...”

“Ah, it makes sense. There’s no way you could survive falling from that height,” Kako said indifferently, unaware of the shock this was to Kirie.

“W... well... I just have one more. Where did Kozue-chan fall from? It wasn’t even reported in Tokyo. Even if the National Defense Forces imposed a reporting ban, they can’t hide a fight with such enormous robots. There would at least be rumors. But there’s nothing... Kozue-chan piloted that robot and fought. Then she fell and died... If all that was real, well, then where were we fighting?”

“Good question,” said Maaya, “But you asking it means you must have thought about it, right? What do you think?”

“...Well, maybe the battle was real, but that Tokyo wasn’t...?”

“What? That doesn’t make any sense!” barked Kako.

“5 out of 10,” smiled Maaya. “Maybe it’s too soon for you to get it right. Think about it some more.”

With that, Maaya and Koyemshi disappeared, leaving only Kako and Kirie.

The dropped bag of bread rolls lay on the sunburnt ground behind the gymnasium.

How long had Isao Kako waited for this day? How many days going unnoticed by anyone, unimportant to anyone, just a play thing for punks? *It’s not right*, he thought.

He had long waited for “his time.” In every story Kako had heard, in manga, anime, in novels, the main characters always had some sort of special power. Their power always arrived suddenly. One day a hidden ability would emerge. One day a hidden self would be restored. One day their father would pass down a giant robot (*reference to Evangelion). They all obtained their “power” suddenly. Then they would fight for the world, as one of the chosen. Kako had always dreamed that day would come. But they were just stories.

They were only fiction, made up, basically lies. Impossible things.

Kako didn’t think of himself as obsessed. He knew that things like that — amazing things like that — hardly even happened.

But...

He wasn’t great in his studies, and he was hardly any better at sports.

My speed? But that's only compared to average people.

Back in fifth grade he failed to get selected for a state university. One in a hundred got selected, but he wouldn't have made even one in ten. His physical appearance was average, with no particular strong point. Kako knew all of this, deep down.

I can't accept it, but I don't have a single special feature. Who could blame me? Who could blame me for wrapping myself in a desire to be a manga hero?

He was ecstatic about his "power."

I've been chosen. I have nothing else.

Of the 13 children, Kako was the one who most believed, and most wanted to believe, in the "game to save the earth" as Maaya called it when they made the contract in the old school. But Kako was also afraid. It wasn't just him who had made the contract, but all 14 of them. Maybe having several people piloting a robot wasn't unusual, but 14 seemed too many.

And...

In the robot anime he'd watched in elementary school — and also occasionally now in his geekier moments — the lead role usually went to a sporty type like Waku. People who don't stand out like Kako usually ended up controlling the robot's ankle or in charge of the radar, saying things like, "It won't take any more of this!"

Am I the bit-part actor here?

He'd prayed that the contract was real, but was also afraid. But Kako wasn't the pilot in the last battle.

It wasn't even Waku as he'd expected, but Kozue, someone Kako hadn't even spoken to.

Have I finally been chosen, only to have a minor role?

This was the loneliness he felt as he watched Kozue's fight.

But this is different. I've been chosen. This time I am the hero. It finally happened. Finally, I, Isao Kako am the hero.

It's already September, but the heat's still so stifling at night.

Waku sat at his desk at home with the window open. His house was in a complex raised up on a slight hill. From the window he could see an unbroken view of the whole street. Above the starry sky, below the city night. It seemed inappropriate in the circumstances, but Waku liked the view. Laid out in front of him was more classics work — his punishment for not meeting the summer vacation homework deadline.

That was what made it inappropriate. Since that day he'd felt down and unable to concentrate on anything. Ever since the day of that "dream."

The feel of Kozue's hand lingered on his. A small, slightly cold hand. Kozue had held his hand desperately as she fought, trying to stop it from shaking.

Takashi Waku remembered. He remembered the moment he let go of Kozue's hand. And the moment she disappeared from view.

A dream.

That's what he'd thought at first. But he woke up to the truth in his room when Tsubasa called. She said she'd seen the same dream as Waku.

It was just as the girl said when we made the contract in the old school. Then the key chain I have given to Kozue in the dream disappeared. And then... ever since the dream Kozue has been missing. Can it really have been a dream?

But there had been no reports of any 500 meter tall black monster appearing, and besides, the Tokyo they had fought in had a supposedly long demolished Tokyo Tower.

Can it really be true?

Waku had certainly made a contract — a contract to become a hero who protects the earth from invading enemies.

That's what I wanted. I didn't want to show off. Just, to try something I couldn't do. But is that really true? I felt somebody call to me on the deck of the ship. Was the old school real or a dream?

If Waku had answered back then he would have said, "Which would I like to believe? Well, I'd prefer it not to be a dream."

But what about now?

Being a hero who saves the earth. It's totally different to playing forward in the soccer team.

Waku saw them in the dream — the Puppet they piloted, and the shocking power of its enemy.

The view from the window. My town.

Waku liked his town. The ramen bar outside the station where middle schoolers could get a free supersize and *chashu*, although garlic was compulsory on health grounds. The old man in the sports store who always joked that he should quit soccer and play baseball. His school friends...

If anything was invading the earth, this is the place he'd want to protect more than anything else.

But can I really do it? That 500 meter giant... Just a few steps would flatten this town in an instant.

The memory of Kozue collapsing onto that Tokyo made him shiver.

Could such a thing really happen here? Could that robot collapse on my house? It's not the same as soccer. In a battle to save the earth you don't shake their hand and say good game at the end, win or lose. It's something else. It's a real fight. If you lose, people die. Even if you win people die.

Waku saw it during Kozue's battle — countless people cruelly slaughtered, followed by Kozue falling before his very eyes.

It was a dream, right? Say I've got it wrong! Please, let it be a dream.

This was what Waku thought now.

Kozue needs to come back, then the 14 of us can decide we got some weird bug on that island and had a shared dream. I could accept that. What's wrong with us all having the same dream? It's just chance that I lost my lucky charm on the day of the dream. It's just chance that Kozue disappeared on the same day. It's too much of a chance. But... but...

Waku still believed that maybe Kozue might simply turn up.

“Waku? It's been a while! Since the Nature School, I mean.”

“Oh, yeah, how's it going?”

Kako began talking as soon as Waku released the hold button on the receiver, not even waiting for him to say hello.

Kako sounded unnaturally upbeat.

What is he so worked up about, worried Waku.

“Hey, get this! I've been chosen! I'm the next pilot!”

Chosen? The next... What does he mean?

Waku didn't get it.

“I'll be operating that thing next time! I'll fight with it, you know, the Puppet. You know, we can't keep calling it the thing or the Puppet. We need a name for it. So, umm, well, the pilot should have naming rights, don't you think? What about the Isaogo? The Isaogo! Doesn't that sound cool?”

Waku somehow managed to interrupt Kako, “Hold on a sec, I don’t get it. What do you mean, chosen?”

Kako talked without drawing breath: about how he heard his name called, about how Maaya and Koyemshi appeared in front of him and Kirie, and about how he was chosen to be the pilot.

“It was real! It’s was all real!”Kako kept repeating.

“So...” Waku asked the one thing he wanted to ask, and the one thing he didn’t want to ask, “What about Kozue?”

“Oh, Kozue? She died,” Kako said. Just like that. It was so simple.

Perhaps because of the quick and open way it was said, Waku had trouble understanding the words. He carefully repeated Kako’s words in his head.

Kozue... Died... How can he be so carefree about it?

“She has to be, doesn’t she, falling from that height?”

“Hold on! Kozue’s dead! Why are so you happy about it?” Waku lashed out, shocked by Kako’s bluntness.

“W... what’s with you? What happened to Kozue was awful, but it couldn’t be helped. We have to save the earth you know.”

What? Kako sounded like he was explaining what happened in a game while a friend had been away. Someone has died, and if this is real and we don’t work this out many more people are also going to die. But Kako’s talking so excitedly. He doesn’t get how big this is at all.

“We’re talking about saving the earth! It’s not a game! Think about it!”

“What’s gotten into you? Why are you so angry? Ah, is it... are you jealous? Did you want to pilot? That’s it isn’t it? Well, sorry, but I was chosen.”

Waku slammed the phone down.

Waku wasn’t the only person Kako called. He called the whole group, one after the other. What Kako wanted was words of praise and envy. Sadly, however, that isn’t what he received.

His thoughts were spinning round and round, something like this: “Chizu? It’s me, Kako. Yeah, from the Nature School. Why didn’t you call me? I said you should call. Oh, your number? I got it from Kirie. Who was that before, on the phone? I didn’t know you had a sister! Anyway, listen up! I’ve been chosen! To be the pilot! To pilot that robot! So, do you, yeah, I mean, do you want to go out? What? But I’m the pilot now! Of the robot! I’m the chosen one! No! Who? Tell me... oh no, not... Kirie?! No way! That’s great! But why? I’m the pilot! Hey, why did you hang up?”

Like Waku, everyone was troubled and sad about Kozue, except Kirie, who warned Kako about this game they’d found themselves caught up in.

For example:

“Hello, this is Mary Ichinose speaking. Yes. Oh, Kako. Yes, it’s me, Maria. I was sort of expecting a call. It’s normally Komo, though. Yes, it seems

you were chosen. Yes. Well, we both have fathers in the military, so we have common things to talk about. We get in touch from time to time.

Anyway, don't take this the wrong way, but I think you should be more careful. No, wait. Listen to what I have to say. You're going crazy ringing everybody all at once. It's already 11pm. You should probably make this your last call. What? I *am* the last call? Huh. Am I supposed to be pleased about that? Ah, well. Just a moment, so you... you even called Ushiro? What?! Ushiro isn't even interested in the slightest. Kana-chan too? Oh, clever. And? Already asleep? That's good. They do say sleep is the best thing for learning.

Okay, let's get to the real issue. It's terrible that Kozue died, but if we are fighting to save the earth then probably lots more people will too.

We have to be prepared. But then, maybe it isn't possible to prepare.

Okay, assuming the last battle really happened, at some stage a new invader will appear. But there are too many unknowns about the battle. What is the enemy's objective? Why is it attacking the earth? In fact, we don't even know whether it's a friend or a foe. What are Koyemshi, Maaya, and that giant Puppet? Isaogo? Hah! I'm not native so I don't have an aesthetic sense for Japanese, but maybe something a bit cooler? Oh well, I guess that's okay.

Anyway, so the established facts are — assuming we trust everything the strange girl and creature say — that if we don't defeat the enemy the earth will be destroyed, or something close to that. I honestly got involved in this thinking it was a game, but this really is crazy. Planning a battle like this is enough to make you a despot.

We have too little information. Do you know the saying, 'War is the continuation of politics by other means?' I'm not surprised if you don't. It's a classic quote. But you really should read more. My father's in the military, but he always says, 'wisdom and knowledge are mankind's best weapon, and will outweigh any armory.' Although, I can tell you I was shocked when he sent me an English translation of 'On War' for my graduation. I didn't expect a dress or anything, but maybe something like a fountain pen might have been more practical.

Huh. How rude of him. Still, he's taller than you'll ever be and he does try to dress well. Oh, wait, I've strayed.

So, a war usually happens for a certain country's benefit, whether it's a security pact or protecting rights to natural resources. There's no evil empire that wants to take over every last bit of the earth for no particular reason, outside of games anyway. How many missiles do you think it would take? There's no country on earth that would want to annihilate its adversary or obliterate another country without a reason. That's because they'd have nothing to gain from it.

We have to find out the enemy's objective. Why is the enemy attacking the earth? What does it want? If we can just find that out, there might be a way to avoid fighting. If we don't, we'll have to defeat every one of them. And that's scary. We're not even allowed to accept surrender. They said we have to fight until someone loses, until someone dies. So be careful. And work with the others. What is the purpose of this battle? We need to know the truth of that black giant, and about the enemy."

Kako was Kako.

It's sad but it's the truth. Even when chosen to pilot a giant robot, Kako was Kako. He hadn't done anything to make it happen, so there was no need to think about the reasons for it.

The next day, and the day after that, his life continued in the same way. He went to school, attended lessons and got pushed around, just like any school kid. The resentment remained locked deep inside him. He resented the bullies that looked down on him. He resented Kirie who didn't respect him enough. He resented the classmates who ignored him. He resented the friends who didn't praise him. He resented the world so full of misfortune.

Gaining the power of a giant robot served only to amplify his feelings.

And so, the day came.

And it happened.

It was Tuesday.

Tuesday, 4th period was classics with Mr. Fujiwara. Mr. Fujiwara was close to retirement and it was said he only came into school to dote on his bonsai's decorating the staff room. It wasn't unusual for him to arrive five minutes late or finish five minutes early, and this was one of those occasions. The lesson finished at quarter past eleven, more accurately, 11:15 and 24 seconds. That was 11 minutes and 36 seconds to the yakisoba roll deadline. There was plenty of time to get to the store, even

walking and chatting to friends — although Kako had none aside from Kirie.

However, five minutes later, Kako wasn't at the store, he was behind the gymnasium.

“Buy them yourself!”

“Eh?”

“I'm not going to be a servant for you punks! If you want to eat go get it yourselves. I won't be your slave anymore!”

I'm the chosen one. I'm a soldier fighting for the earth. Why should I have to be a slave to you punks? Kako had planned to continue. But the people he was talking to weren't the types to patiently listen to his speech to the end.

With one punch to the stomach, they hit the off button. Kako really was Kako.

He didn't have the reflexes to avoid the punch to the abdomen, nor the muscle strength to take the blow. He didn't even have the judgment to know that hands are faster than words for these guys.

“What? Were you saying something? Kako? I thought I heard someone mouthing off? We'd better teach him a lesson.”

The lesson lasted 15 minutes. They weren't stupid. They knew if they went too far it would come back on them. So they made sure not to leave him with any marks of violence. One rule was not to strike his face.

Or to put it another way, as long as it didn't leave marks, anything was okay.

Afternoon classes.

Kako was the only one wearing a jersey. He explained that he got his uniform soaking wet. Incidentally, it was Kirie who brought the jersey to Kako behind the gymnasium.

Aside from being the only pupil wearing a jersey, it was a quiet afternoon with warm sunlight shining in. Sitting by the window, Kako held his aching stomach with his hand, and put all of his attention on drawing in his notebook. It was a childish drawing with no meaning to anyone but Kako. The thing Kako had decided to draw was a burning city, with a strange-looking alien swooping down. It was Kako's city engulfed in flames. Mirai Tower by the station had crumbled in one attack. The bullies from earlier were, sadly, too slow to escape the attack and perished. Kirie, Kako's parents and Chizu were in impending danger and were calling out Kako's name.

From nowhere a black giant appears. An ally of justice. Kako's power. The black giant fires its laser beams towards the enemy alien. An overwhelming triumph. Then, all glory to Kako.

Kako told himself this wasn't just a delusion. It would really happen, and soon.

The enemy has to arrive soon. And, then, then I'll be a hero. Come on, hurry. Come on, invader.

He incessantly drew out his scene with intense concentration. After some time, he began to murmur the words, “come on, hurry, come on, hurry,” and the girl sitting in the next seat looked over at him, confused, but Kako didn’t notice.

Other than this, the afternoon was a very peaceful one.

A warm, relaxing breeze drifted on the air.

Who was it that noticed it first? Kako, immersed in sketching out his epic battle with the invader in his notebook, didn’t notice until the sky suddenly became dark.

“What’s that?” a string of voices shouted.

Ripped from his imagined world, Kako looked up at the sky.

“Isaogo!”

There it stood. The 500 meter giant clad in jet black armor. The classroom was in turmoil. Some screamed in terror, others in excitement.

“Q... quiet, everyone!” shouted the teacher, her voice reaching hysteria, but to no effect.

Some pupils leaned out of the window to look up at the Puppet. It was the only way to take in the sheer size of it.

Amongst the chaos, one pupil sneaked out of the back door of the classroom, without anybody noticing. Kako ran. Down the linoleum corridor, heading for the roof.

Finally. Finally. Finally. Isaogo! My power! All mine! My own robot! It's true! It isn't a dream! It really exists.

Every classroom he passed was in uproar. Screams and angry voices pounded his ears as he sprinted down the corridor. To Kako, it was all applause for him.

He shivered. He actually felt good.

Right now, everyone in the school, no, more than that, everyone in this city is watching my Isaogo, watching me. Nobody will ever ignore me again.

From today on I'm reborn! No, today I've finally become me — a hero protecting the world.

Kako opened the door and ran out onto the rooftop. The giant was really there, blocking out the sun, putting the whole school in shadow.

"Koyemshi! Maaya!" Kako yelled.

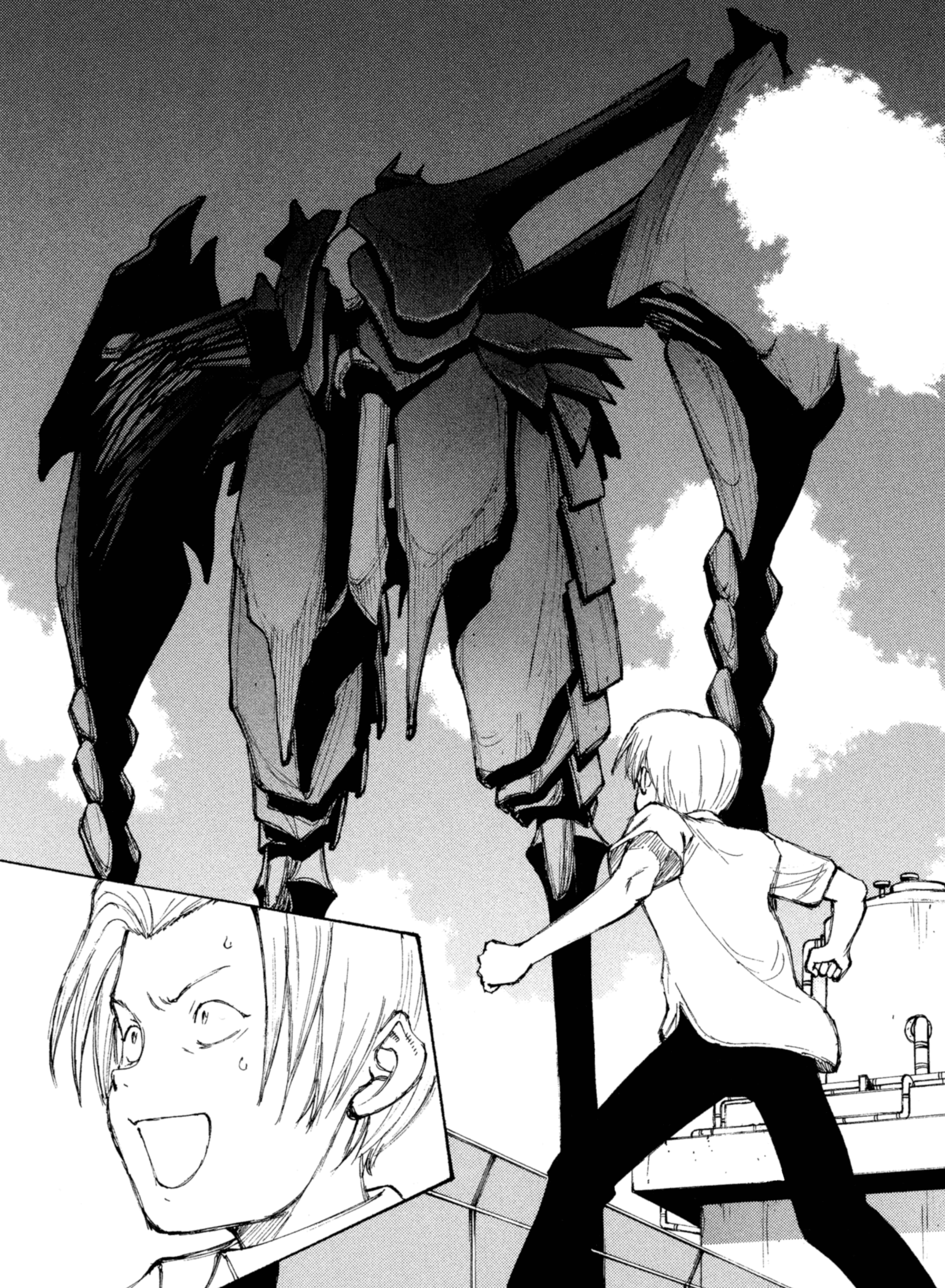
"Where are you? The pilot's here! Quick! I'm the pilot!"

"Ka... Kako-kun... so you were up here."

It was Kirie, with his usual hesitant voice.

That's fine. We'll get taken up there together anyway.

Kako turned to the giant Puppet and yelled again, "Koyemshi! Koyemshi! Maaya! Maaya!"



“Yes, yes, yes, I’m right here. Also, incidentally, could I ask that you not refer to a young lady on such familiar terms?”

“Fine, fine! I get it, just hurry up and take me with you. Come to think of it, where’s the enemy? Is it still not here?!”

“Yes, yes, yes. Well then, I’ll transfer you. This is the biggest moment of your entire life, you know. So, could you at least fight a battle you won’t regret?”

A transfer. A moment of dizziness. It’s a scene he’s already accustomed to: a pure white room, with fourteen chairs floating about — or more accurately, thirteen chairs and one mat.

The other children were already there. In his mind, Kako wondered bitterly why he, the leading role, wouldn’t be called first.

Out loud, though, he made a show of joking around. “Make way, make way, here comes the pilot!”

There was no response. Everyone’s eyes were on Maaya and Anko, who seemed to be in the midst of an argument.

“Hey, I never heard anything about there being a summons in the middle of class! Don’t you think that’s embarrassing?!”

“I’m so terribly sorry. This just happens to be a battle for the fate of the world, you see. If you wouldn’t mind cooperating...”

“But still! It was really embarrassing to be pulled out of the classroom! I had to say that my stomach hurt and I needed to go to the infirmary, for

goodness' sake! Starting tomorrow they're definitely going to start saying 'Anko eats too much' and stuff! Uuugh, this is the worst!"

Koyemshi, who had brought Kako here, pushed his way in. "Okay, okay, okay. So, would you rather be teleported out of the classroom? That sort of thing would cause an uproar, surely. It's quite a bit of trouble, you know, to teleport you all at your convenience."

"But hey, Anko, those are some pretty cute clothes. That's the uniform of the girls' junior high, isn't it? You go to a pretty good school."

"I know, right — wait, Kanji, how do you know that? Are you some kind of uniform-loving perv? Ewww!"

"Shut up! Mom has a lot of the materials she uses at work lying around at home."

"Huh? Is she a fashion designer?"

"Nah, she's an architect."

"Huh? Why would an architect have materials for a uniform?"

I don't understand what goes on in those people's heads!

"Not even your mother's?"

"Hey!" Kako yelled without thinking. "Be serious! The battle's about to begin!" With that, everyone's attention finally turned to Kako.

"What a weird uniform."

"Wait, why is it a jersey?" Maria and Anko teased matter-of-factly.

— Flashback. Lunch break.

“Training”. — Kako shouted, trying to shake off a humiliating memory.

“Shut up! What does it matter?! Hurry up and sit down! This isn’t a game!”

At Kako’s harsh words, the other kids seated themselves. Kana sat next to Maria, as usual. Nearby, there was a single empty seat: a wheelchair. As a matter of course, everyone’s eyes turned in that direction.

“...Kozue’s...” somebody murmured quietly.

A heavy silence engulfed the white room.

“It can’t be helped!” Kako was shouting again. “We’ll just have to work harder in her place!”

They were empty words, too empty. Even Kako knew that he was just spinning his wheels.

Why? I’m the pilot, you know, Kako thought discontentedly. *Couldn’t they at least encourage me to do my best or something?* But he forcefully restrained himself.

However. After all, all everyone else could do was watch his fight from the sidelines.

If I show them a real battle, he thought, *they’ll see me in a different light. Yeah, that’s right. A hero would have no need to scrounge for responses from his band of supporters. Supporting characters should just gather amongst themselves.*

Kako looked at the scene projected before his eyes. He was overlooking his town from a high, faraway place. The school at his feet looked terribly small. The distance from his house to the school, which he had always run along frantically after sleeping in, could now be crossed in barely a single step.

“Heh heh. So my town was really this small all along...” he muttered quite naturally.

“Kako, is this the town where you guys live?” Chizu asked.

“Y... yeah. This is our town. We were all in class, and suddenly, this robot appeared...” Kirie was the one who responded.

Thanks for the explanation, you background character, Kako thought, but none of that stuff really matters.

More importantly, where are your encouraging words for the hero, Chizu?

“This time for sure, it’s all real, isn’t it... Right now, the earth — Kako’s town — is right beneath us.” Mako said quietly.

What an obvious thing to say. Haven’t I’ve been telling them all along? This is the real thing.

“So, I’m the pilot, huh. Well, why don’t we start with my first step toward greatness?”

“Wait!” Mako said sharply.

One by one, they were all getting in the way.

What could it be this time?

“What are you thinking? There are still people down there! Don’t you remember the last battle? Do you want to crush all your friends and family?!”

Upon hearing that, it finally hit him. The view beneath Kako — no, beneath the Puppet — had been enlarged and projected onto a screen. There were people down there, on foot or in cars, who were evacuating. The town was in a panic.

Perhaps because they were all rushing too much, many of the roads were congested with traffic and pile-ups. The fact that some people had abandoned their cars and were fleeing on foot were only spurring on the chaos. As if following along with Kako’s gaze, more and more new windows were opening. People fled in all directions. All of them, when they looked over their shoulders, wore terrified expressions. What their frightened faces were looking at, was, of course, Kako’s Puppet — the “Isaogo.”

Their expressions revealed their fright, but to Kako this was perfectly pleasant. It gave him a satisfying sense of superiority, and just a little bit of relief.

Well, his mother and father would both be out of town at work, and even his sister was currently at college. As far as friends, the only one he thought he should help was Kirie, who was right there.

Although... well, it couldn’t be helped. He supposed he could wait. *I am the champion of justice, after all,* he thought. *But.*

“Is the enemy not coming yet? It’d be pretty bad if it came right now,” Kanji said.

That is true. This is only until the enemy comes. Once the fight begins, I wouldn’t be worrying about any of the people below, Kako thought.

“Looks like it’s not here yet.” Maaya was right: looking around, there was absolutely no sign that the enemy was coming.

How anticlimactic, Kako thought; *here I am, ready to fight, and yet... how boring.*

“I guess we just have to wait,” he grumbled casually, sitting on the chair with his legs swinging back and forth lazily.

However, from the Puppet’s point of view, the evacuation of the men and women was astonishingly slow. It was just like watching a parade of ants.

Then, a metallic clank. The screen magnified. It was the same kind of fighter aircraft they’d seen before: the eighty-eight style light aircraft.

“So they’re here already? That was fast,” Kako said, honestly voicing his thoughts.

“Of course. The enemy is an aircraft that can fly at the speed of sound, so you have to move within seconds or it won’t make a difference,” Mako explained.

“I hope they don’t get hit or anything...”

“I’m sure they’ll be okay.”

Looking at the enhanced image, Mako seemed to be in her element as she started to explain. “Originally, they were on alert standby — their main function was to combat airspace violations by other countries. Of course, the eighty-eight aircraft is a multi-functional machine, but it should normally only be equipped with anti-aircraft weaponry.”

“..In other words, these two machines are fundamentally flying aircraft that are simply designed to fight flying aircraft that come from other countries, so it won’t have bombs or anything for attacking the surface... is what Mako is saying.” Mako’s explanation was incomprehensible to the others, but Maria was able to follow it without hesitation.

“I see... I don’t really get it, but I do understand that Mako is a huge nerd,” Waku said, causing Mako to turn bright red and lower her gaze.

Sure enough, just as Mako said, the two aircraft that appeared only circled in the sky, as they had last time.

“At any rate, the enemy still hasn’t appeared, and the evacuation isn’t done yet, so... I’m bored. Maybe if I scare them a little, it’ll motivate them to run away faster?”

“Don’t be stupid! These are real people’s lives here!” The joke had made Mako’s tone change drastically from earlier as she chastised him.

She’s so annoying, Kako thought. I bet even at school she willingly runs for class president and makes the whole place boring, probably. And...

When he was scolded about something, Kako was the type of boy who only wanted to do it more. Accordingly, he sought out faces he

recognized among the people beneath him. There he found three young juvenile delinquents who had bullied him badly in the past.

Of course, Kako wasn't a boy who could be said to be a good person. Holding a grudge against the juveniles who had looked down upon and tormented him, he wanted to deal with it in the worst way possible, just as they had hit Kirie when they'd had power over him. This is by no means a defense of Kako's actions, but... what took place next was most certainly not what Kako had intended. The boys were running away in a panic.

"Heh heh heh. I'll give 'em a scare.... This is your divine punishment for making fun of me. I do want to make sure I can move this thing properly, after all." With those words, Kako took aim at the three boys fleeing below and fired his laser — only intending to startle them a little.

Yes, it is the kind of scene that you often see in movies and the like. The hero shoots a gun after the villains as they're running away. The villains are frightened, fall on their rumps, occasionally even wet themselves a little.

All Kako wanted was to recreate that scene and vent his anger a little... that was his only intention.

Of course, there were times when he had muttered "I'll kill you!" to the boys who had bullied him. He'd bought a 10-centimeter-long knife at a neighborhood store, and at least once or twice he'd practiced some dangerous "maintenance" with his hands in his room at night — all the while imagining himself murdering those boys with that blunt, shiny "power".

However, Kako's words and actions at that time were only the wild impulses he'd had in those moments. Murder is the most forbidden crime that a person can commit; Kako himself knew this. Kako had no intention to kill; he wouldn't have had the nerve.

However. The beam that fired from the Puppet made impact just as intended, at the feet of the delinquents' leader, Kenta Ando. And the shockwave from that impact was more than enough to completely slaughter Ando and the other two junior high school delinquents nearby.

The fragments of asphalt that were smashed up by the shockwave flew around like bullets. At first, from the faraway vantage point of the Puppet, Kako could only think that what had happened was some kind of joke. All he had wanted to see was the surprised juvenile delinquents trembling and begging for forgiveness. But in reality, Ando hadn't trembled, hadn't been surprised. Of course not. He had been smashed into the side of a building with his head twisted around at a 90-degree angle, his red blood soaking the asphalt; how could he have had time to spare for acting surprised?

And it wasn't just Ando. In the surrounding area, dozens of other kids in the same uniform as Kako's lay scattered on the ground. Having been struck by the flying asphalt, some lay in the road moaning, while others had collapsed without a sound. This was the result of Kako's first use of his power.

"Huh?" For a moment, Kako and the other children couldn't understand what had happened. It had just been bright for a moment. He had only

fired a little bit of light. How could that have caused the scene before them?

People he recognized from his school lay scattered in all directions, their blood spilling onto the ground.

“Nooooo!”

“What did you do?!”

“You murderer!” Shrieks and angry shouting rose up around him.

“It wasn’t me!” Kako responded quickly — searching for a reason that he could use to dodge the blame almost as an automatic reflex.

First, he looked at Kirie. Kirie had done it — if given the chance, Kako would probably have asserted this. But of course, that would be difficult.

And so: “T-this thing just moved on its own! Really, all on its own!” He pushed the responsibility off handily onto the Puppet.

And yet... “Impossible.” Maaya objects plainly. “It’s impossible for the stuffed animal to move on its own. It only moves according to the pilot’s thoughts. You caused this to happen!”

“How could you?!”

“Do you understand what you’ve done?!”

Kako’s companions focused their attacks on him. Then... realizing that he couldn’t avoid the blame, Kako instead began to deny that the scene in front of him was real.

“N... no way...” Shouting, Kako waved his arms wildly as if trying to dispel the images on the screen. “This can’t be real! Right? The battle before this wasn’t real either! Nothing happened to Tokyo, right?! That wasn’t Tokyo! So this isn’t really my town either! So it’s all a lie! This isn’t my town! This has to be a lie!”

And then, Kako began firing the laser randomly at the town.

“What — what are you doing?!”

His childish reaction was like an infant who, when his mother discovers what he’s been up to, gets flustered and reflexively starts to do the same thing.

However. No matter how childish the motive, the 500-meter giant was still firing lasers with overwhelming destructive power.

“It’s fake! It’s all a lie! This is a dream! So it doesn’t matter how much I attack! It’ll still be fine! It’s a lie!”

Fires were breaking out throughout the town. Certainly, viewed from 500 meters up, the entire town looked small enough to be entirely fake. But the scenes that emerged on the magnified screen and captured Kako’s gaze as he flailed about could never be mistaken for fakes. The town, covered in flames. Buildings crumbling.

People dying. And... the fighter planes that had been circling in the sky swooped downward. Was this a suicidal attack, or an attempt to be a decoy? Fire spouted from the aircrafts’ autocannons. Armor-piercing

ammunition shot out at ultra-high speed, a thousand per second. They fired off all of their bullets.

However... In effect, these rapid-fire bullets might be able to pierce the armor of land-based weapons, but against the 500-meter giant they were completely meaningless. All of the bullets bounced harmlessly off the black armor of the Puppet. If anything, their only effect was to frighten Kako deeply, and the two aircrafts' efforts to save the town only caused even more damage.

“Waaaaaaaah!” Kako let out a pathetic shriek.

The lasers fired in retribution. It wasn't just one or two shots. To make apparent just how frightened he was, Kako shot hundreds of lasers from the Puppet's body, firing with all of its power.

It was an incredibly excessive amount of firepower for the two aircraft. Having reduced altitude for their attack, the aircraft took the full brunt of the volley of lasers, which not only vaporized them without a trace but mowed down the town below.

“You... you moron!”

“Stop!”

“Kako, stop it! Our town...!” Even the usually docile Kirie was shouting now.

“It's a dream! This is just a dream!” Kako yelled as if to shake off the voices of his friends — as if trying to convince himself.

But nobody could possibly believe that. Kirie and Kako's panic indicated more eloquently than anything else that this was unmistakably reality.

With the cockpit in this state, Maaya's calm voice rang out clearly. "Well then. Have you finished warming up now?" Her expression completely unmoved by the tragedy before their eyes, she was still composed as ever.

"'Warming up'?"

Before anyone could protest against her choice of words, Maaya interrupted. "The enemy is coming," she said.

And just as she said, there was a now-familiar scene unfolding. A hole opened up in the sky. And from that hole, the enemy swooped out.

How should it be described? It was like an electric fan monster, or perhaps a sunflower monster — "Pinwheel". Floating in the air, it had eight long protuberances that looked like petals or propellers, and a cone-shaped base that connected to a thin, stem-like part. As it oscillated slowly, Pinwheel descended onto Kako's town.

The Puppet and Pinwheel stood confronting each other.

The town was all ablaze, and the delinquents were dead.

Ironically, it was just like the scene that Kako had drawn in his notebook not long ago. The only difference was that Kako was the one who had destroyed the town. Twelve thousand, five hundred and sixty-two people: that was the number of missing people and casualties in the battle that would later be called the first disaster.

There's a famous joke that killing one person makes you a murderer but killing a million makes you a hero. So was Kako really a hero? Or was he a murderer?

The opposing Pinwheel's propellers turned. As it rotated, the tips of its eight propellers lit up, then emitted rays of light. The eight beams merged together in mid-air to form a huge torrent of light that hurtled toward the Puppet.

"Here it comes!"

"Waaaah!" With that, Kako moved the legs of the Puppet for the first time.

As terrified as Kako was, it was only natural that the Puppet crushed the gymnasium underfoot as it retreated.

The impact of the laser simply blew off half of its right arm.

"Wh... what?! D-damn it! Move! Isaogo!"

The Puppet fired a laser in return. Bullseye. A little flower bloomed on the surface of the Pinwheel — but that was all.

"Why?! My attacks aren't having any effect! It's a trick!"

"The enemy's probably specialized in firing weapons!" Kanji shouted back at Kako.

Pinwheel's propellers began to turn again.

"Dodge it!" Kodama shouted, but Mako's voice rose above his. "You can't!"

“Why not?!”

“If you dodge, it’ll hit the city!”

The speed of the propellers’ rotation increased, along with their brightness.

“Aaaaargh!” Then Kako dodged — or rather, he ran. Turning its back on the enemy, the 500-meter form of the Puppet sprinted with all its might.

Of course, he made no notice of the town underfoot. He ran and ran, trampling the people and cars below that were desperately trying to flee the town.

Then, Pinwheel’s laser struck those individuals who had narrowly escaped that peril. Following the path of the Puppet’s escape, Pinwheel’s laser razed over the town — slicing through railway paths, cutting diagonally through the train station building.

But Kako took no notice of the expansive damage that resulted from his actions.

Run away.

Trampling people underfoot.

Run away.

Kicking cars around.

Run away. Run away. Run away.

“Stop! The town!” Mako cried desperately. But her words didn’t get through to him, drowned out by his own screams.

“Waaaaaaaah!”

“It’s no use! You saw what happened before! If he takes a direct hit, he’s screwed!” Kanji insisted.

“But if it misses him, it’ll hit the town!”

“We’re more important than the town!” Kodama snapped, backing Kanji up.

“How could you say that?”

“No... unfortunately, Kodama is right,” Maria said, her face clouded with bitterness.

“If we sacrifice ourselves to protect the town, who exactly is going to protect it once we’re gone?”

“That’s...” Mako couldn’t answer such a question.

“Usually, just one person has to die to protect everyone else. But... if that’s impossible, all we can do is save as many people as we can. Hence, what Kodama says is true. To protect the town, we have to be able to fight; in other words, we absolutely can’t let ourselves be done in. ...but...”

Maria’s gaze naturally turned to the half-crazed Kako.

“Why is this happening?! Damnit! What is this?! Last time it was such an easy victory! Even Kozue was able to win! So why does mine have to be such a hard fight?! Unbelievable! It’s unbelievable! Even someone like Kozue could beat her opponent! Why can’t I beat mine?! Aaaagh!” Kako didn’t seem to know what he was saying anymore.

“Kako! Snap out of it!” Waku yelled furiously, but of course he couldn’t get through to him.

Pinwheel fired over and over, and Kako’s Puppet kept running away, furthering the damage to the town.

This happened over and over.

Several of the children began to notice something: between the firing of the enemy’s beams, there was something of a time lapse. This was the process between each shot: First the tips of the propellers would light up. Then they would turn. When the oscillation reached a certain speed, the beams of light would fire from the eight propellers. By some principle or other, these beams would converge in midair, forming one powerful beam, and fire toward the target.

That was the enemy’s attack pattern.

The group didn’t understand what the rotation of the propellers meant, but at any rate, it seemed like they had to rotate in order for the beam to fire. In other words, by carefully watching the speed of the rotation, they could figure out the timing of the attack.

“If you can get up close and strike in the moment of stillness after the laser fires, you should be able to beat it...” Kodama muttered, growing impatient.

A few of the others nodded their heads in agreement. But Kako, who had the crucial role, wasn't listening to Kodama's words.

By the looks of it, the propellers were the only functional parts of the enemy machine — it had no arms or legs for punching or kicking.

Judging by the power of its lasers, it seemed that it was the stronger machine in terms of shooting, just as Kanji had said; but it was evident that in close combat the Puppet would stand a better chance.

In the last fight, a fistfight with a fellow human-shaped machine, the Puppet had been the overwhelming victor, so surely this time, if it could just get up close to the body of the opponent, they would have a chance at winning.

But Kako, running away wildly before the enemy's laser, would never notice that.

“Aaargh!”

“I am the chosen one!!”

Kako shouted nothing but these kinds of phrases as he fled.

Then the next strike came from the enemy. This time, though, rather than shooting after the Puppet, it fired directly in its path.

“It fired the laser ahead!”

“It’s predicting our movements?!” Kodama and Maria exclaimed at the same time.

“Waaaah!” Kako gave out another pitiable scream, and stopped the legs of the Puppet for the first time since he had started fleeing from the enemy’s first attack.

But still, the robot had been sprinting with all its might. The inertia from that might still be enough to kill him. With its legs stopped, the Puppet started skidding right into the path of the laser.

“Noooooooo! Stop, stop, stop!!”

Whether it was responding to those words or not, the Puppet halted right as it was about to take a direct hit from the laser.

A small but ominous tremor ran through the cockpit. And then, Kako could no longer move the Puppet.

“No, no, no!”

“Move, Kako! You’ll get hit!”

“You’ll die! If you take a hit like that, you’ll die!” Kanji’s words, too, fell on deaf ears as Kako held his head in his hands — as if this action might cause the scene in front of him to disappear.

The Pinwheel rotated. But this time...

“Its rotation changed?!” exclaimed Kodama, who had been continuing to observe the enemy’s movements.

Indeed, four of the propellers were rotating clockwise, while four rotated counterclockwise. Then, the laser fired. This time, it was not one beam but two, which struck to the left and right of the Puppet.

From both sides, the lasers began to close in on the Puppet like a pair of scissors.

“We can’t run away from this one!” Mako’s words came out almost in a scream.

No — there was one way. A few of them, including Kodama, had noticed it.

The attack was coming in from either side like scissors. There was only one way to go from here:

Forward.

He could move forward before the scissors closed, and knock the opponent out. But how could they get Kako, who’d done nothing but run away scared, to move forward? Even if they told him what to do, he wouldn’t listen.

In the minds of the children, the word “death” rose to the surface. The girls started to scream. And then —

“Why don’t you hurry up and run?” Among the screams, Kirie’s voice somehow resounded clearly. His tone was cold, out-of-place, clearly ridiculous.

“Hurry up and run. Kako, you’re a fast runner, right?”

What are you saying, the others thought, at a time like this?! But...

“Kirie!! You asshole!!”

Never exerting very much effort, believing himself to be a special individual, and refusing to accept reality unless the world conforms to his desires, blaming everything on the people around him when it went awry... This was the usual Kako, and he was behaving exactly as described.

And so, forgetting the situation he was in, he jumped out of his chair and slapped Kirie, who was sitting in front of him. Punching him in the face and knocking him down, Kako then straddled Kirie and continued to strike.

And that was what saved the children.

The Puppet mimicked these movements exactly: it lunged forward suddenly, then leaned down and started beating down the town below. The beams passed right over it; the cockpit trembled, and a few protuberances on its back were shaved off, but that was the extent of the damage.

The Puppet had just barely dodged the enemy's attack. And as Kako assaulted Kirie, the Puppet closed the distance between itself and the Pinwheel.

They were at point-blank range, the enemy directly before them. With just one more step forward, the Puppet would be in the perfect position to attack.

“Screw you, Kirie! Take this!” Kako kept beating down Kirie, but —

“Kako! In front of you! Now’s your chance!” Hearing this, he finally recognized the opportunity.

“A-all right!” The Puppet stood up and bashed the Pinwheel with its right hand, snapping off one of its propellers.

Undaunted, the Pinwheel began to prepare another shot. The ends of the propellers glowed; the rotation began.

“Stop it from rotating! That way it won’t be able to fire!” Kanji yelled.

“All right, I’ve got this!” Kako responded in high spirits — having gotten the upper hand this once, he seemed to have completely forgotten his panicked state from just moments before.

He wedged the Puppet’s left arm in between two of the propellers.

A contest of strength began between the black arm of the Puppet and the pure white propellers of the Pinwheel. Sparks flew at the point of contact. As both armors began to scrape away, the rotation of the propellers halted.

“We did it!”

“Yeah! It stopped! Now end it in one blow, Kako!”

“Shut up! I know! Don’t order me around!” Holding the propellers in place with his left hand, Kako struck the Pinwheel with his right, haphazardly attacking the base of the propellers or the core section.

Strike after strike.

He was attacking with all his strength, but without much purpose.

“Kako! Don’t get crazy! Start by taking away its ability to attack — aim for the propellers!”

“Didn’t I tell you not to give me orders?!” Ignoring Maria’s directions, Kako kept up his assault. Then...

“What the?!” The remaining seven propellers had flown off; they were attached to the main body by some kind of thin wire. Then, the freely soaring propellers flew circles around the Puppet, binding it up with those wires.

“What did I tell you!”

“Shake them off!”

“I, I can’t! The right arm won’t move!”

Now, in the midst of this situation, the tips of the seven propellers began to glow. They began their attack, firing off thin lasers at the Puppet.

“Since when can it still shoot in this condition?!”

The seven propellers focused their attacks in on the Puppet’s right shoulder. The lasers seemed weak individually, but it could compensate for that with this concentrated attack.

“Shoot them down with the laser!”

“R-right!”

Lasers fired from the entire body of the Puppet at the detached propellers, but they skillfully evaded the attacks, and all the while, the pinpointed attack of their lasers continued unabated. Their firing mechanisms had unparalleled accuracy.

“Kako! Brace yourself now!”

“For what?!”

“You have to beat it now before it kills you!”

“But my right arm won’t move!”

“What about your left, then?!”

“R-right!”

At this, the Puppet raised its left arm and swung hard.

However, the swing hit nothing but air.

“What are you doing?!”

“The arm is too long!” Kako retorted against his friends’ critical remarks.

The Puppet’s arm was long enough to reach the ground. The reason it had won out in the last close-range fistfight was that its left arm had been damaged by the first blow; this had proved to be an advantage. The excessive length of its arms had actually been a handicap in close-quarters combat so far.

“Then you’ll have to detach it,” Maaya said coolly.

“Detach it?”

“Oh my, had I not mentioned this? All of the Puppet’s parts can be detached whenever you like,” Maaya responded to Kako.

“I-is it really okay to just pop it off like that?!”

Kako seemed uneasy.

“What are you talking about?! At this rate, things are about to end really badly!” Waku shouted, furious that Kako was acting so wishy-washy at the last moment.

The Puppet was starting to vibrate under the enemy’s non-stop laser attack.

“Aah, okay, okay!” The left arm of the Puppet severed itself in the middle.

“Listen up, no more hesitating now! Just beat the enemy down!”

This time at last, the Puppet’s left arm collided with the opponent. The focus of their attack turned on the Puppet’s left shoulder.

Which would come first — the Puppet defeating the Pinwheel or the Pinwheel destroying the Puppet’s left arm, its last means of attacking?

The match was extremely close — only a hair’s width separated them.

In the same moment that the Puppet broke through the base of the Pinwheel to locate and smash its vital parts, its left arm crashed to the ground with a thunderous roar.

Victory — or so it seemed.

The enemy collapsed, and the children in the Puppet were still alive.

However...

“Yeah! I did it!” Kako was the only one celebrating.

Kirie — the boy who lived in the same town as Kako — was staring dumbfoundedly at the smoking remains of the town below. They were the ones who had caused all this. Just how many people must have died?

“What’s the matter with you all? Hey, what’s with the long faces? Guys!”

“Us? What’s the matter with you?! What were you thinking?!” Waku responded. “How many people do you think were killed?!”

The color drained from Kako’s face. Of course, even he understood what he’d just done.

“S-shut up! I couldn’t help it! It was my first time! Besides, I still won, so what does it matter?!”

“Don’t be an idiot! Is this really a victory?! How can you call smashing up your own town ‘winning’?!”

“Enough of your ‘hero’ crap! We’re just a bunch of middle school students stupidly piloting around a giant robot! Sure, it sounds like an anime, but this is our reality! Kozue is dead! Those people from your town are dead too! You... no, all of us killed them!”

“W... what’s with you, Waku... Did you get cold feet? ...W-well, why don’t you just forfeit your turn, then?... I’m the real pilot, anyway... all

you can do is just watch, anyway... I'll do better next time. That way... you can't complain..." Kako answered, frightened by Waku's angry demeanor.

But before Waku could answer, Maaya cut in coldly. "Unfortunately, that's impossible."

"Impossible? What is?" Kako asked, puzzled.

"All of it. First of all, once you've made a contract, you can't back out of it. Secondly, each pilot can only fight one battle."

"N-no one told us that! How come?! I'm supposed to be the pilot! No way! I took this guy down, and I'll fight the next one, too!"

"That's impossible," said Koyemshi. "After all, this stuffed doll uses the pilot's life force to move."

"...huh?"

What did he just say?

"Like I said, the Puppet gets its energy from all of your lives. As each pilot fights a single battle, that pilot's life is stolen away. That's why multiple pilots are required. Do you understand?"

This time, Kako's face froze.

The pilot's life is stolen away...? "S-so I'm going to die?"

"Correct. Thank you for your trouble."

"Then, that means Kozue..."

“Y-you’re kidding me! Bastard!” Interrupting Waku, Kako leapt forward and struck Koyemshi.

“Oh dear! Please don’t take out your anger on me. What’s the problem? You get to use your worthless lives to fight for the sake of humanity. Don’t you think it’s great to die in peace knowing that?

Did you have any last requests...?”

“No way!” Kako’s scream made Waku’s eardrums tremble.

“No, no, no, no, no! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die!” Kako threw himself off of his chair, kicking and screaming like a child in the white room of the cockpit.

Worst of all, Kako was still in control of the Puppet. Following his movements, the Puppet rolled around haphazardly, and in fact was even firing its lasers at random. Now even those areas that had narrowly avoided damage in the battle not long before were getting destroyed.

“Cut it out!” Instinctively, Waku threw himself at Kako, pinning his body down frantically.

“Why would you add to the number of victims? Why would you keep killing?!”

“Shut up! What should I do, then? Just shut up and die quietly?! I don’t want to die! Don’t wanna die!”

The two of them were getting into a scuffle, but Waku had a natural advantage in terms of stamina.

Kako was pinned down, his movements slowing.

“Calm down! There must be something we can... agh!” Kako’s left hand had reached out to grab Waku’s throat. He was deadly serious — in his panic, Kako was seriously strangling Waku.

“K... st... op...”

“Shut up! Shut up! What would you know about how I feel?!”

“Y... ou...” It was too painful. Waku could barely hold himself together anymore. In this position, still on top of Kako, he had the advantage. Waku began to strangle Kako with both hands.

“Cut... it... out... Ka... ko...”

“Sh... ut... up... you... damn...”

Then... the Puppet stopped moving. The strength drained from the hand that had been grabbing Waku’s neck.

...The hand fell away limply.

At that, finally regaining a hold of herself, Maria put her hand on Waku’s shoulder. “Enough, Waku... let go... Kako’s... already dead...”

“I know! I know that... His heartbeat’s stopped! He’s getting colder and colder! This guy is...!”

“Then let go!”

“But I can’t! My hands won’t let go! They won’t let him go! I can’t get my hands to move!” Waku’s voice rose into a scream. Whether it was from

the extreme tension or panic over the sudden situation, Waku's hands were frozen around Kako's neck.

"Guys, please help!" At Maria's plea, the others came to pry Waku's fingers off of Kako's neck, one by one. As they were doing so, Waku felt through the palm of his hands the warmth draining out of Kako's body.

Finally, with great effort, his friends managed to pull all ten fingers away from Kako's neck — revealing a pallid, ghastly bruise in the shape of Waku's handprints.

"It... wasn't me, right...?"

Waku murmured in a daze.

"I didn't kill him, did I...? Did I kill Kako...?"

Nobody could answer that question, of course. To deny that would be to confirm Maaya's statement. The person who pilots the Puppet will die — in other words, that would mean that all of them were going to die...

"Don't worry. Each person dies after piloting the Puppet once. It's the truth. Even if you did kill him, all you did was speed it up by a few minutes." Maaya alone spoke as she looked down impassively at Kako's body.

"Still, this certainly is unpleasant," she said, with the tone of somebody worrying over an excessive amount of garbage.

"Generally, nobody gets upset over one or two bodies turning up with no apparent cause of death, but this is most certainly the corpse of a murder

victim now. We have no choice, Koyemshi. Go ahead and stuff this body into some opening on the Puppet, please.”

“Understood, my lady,” Koyemshi replied.

It was a short, blunt conversation. Then, in the next moment, Kako’s body had abruptly vanished. Koyemshi must have teleported it away, the remaining children realized.

However, they couldn’t believe it. Kako, who’d been alive just moments ago, was dead. Furthermore, anyone else who became a pilot would die too. It was all so sudden that it didn’t seem real. They couldn’t understand it — or rather, they all refused to do so.

Then it dawned on Waku. *The robot only had one pilot... but fourteen people had made the contract. Why did they need fourteen pilots...? ‘Fifteen enemies will attack the earth,’ Maaya had said on the island. The Teacher had defeated the first enemy. So — fourteen enemies remained. And there were fourteen children.*

That was why there were fourteen of them. Everyone here... sooner or later, everyone sitting on a chair here would die. These chairs weren’t the seats of the chosen heroes. They were electric chairs — dooming all those who sat in them to their deaths. And it was too late for any of them to run away.

“I’m sorry... Kana...” Maria whispered, moving to embrace Kana, her voice full of pain. She had stopped Ushiro from attempting to exclude Kana from the contract. Only in hindsight could she see what she had

done: by pushing her into agreeing to the contract, Maria had forced Kana into the electric chair.

“Why wouldn’t you mention something so important from the beginning?!” Anko cried in protest.

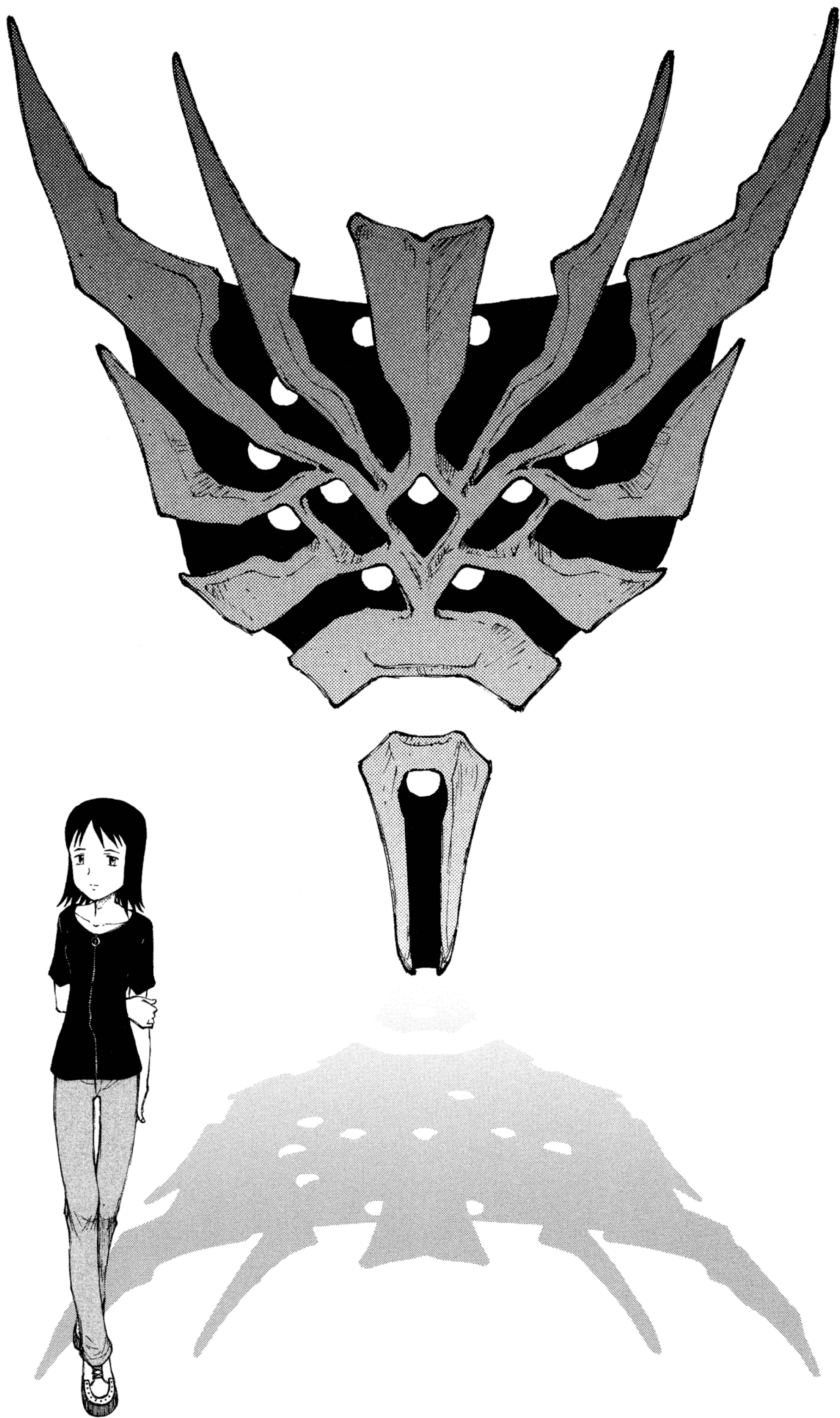
“Well, because there’s no way you would have agreed if we’d told you, of course. But you know, the enemy waits for no one. How would you choose fourteen people to save the world? A national referendum? Well, that wouldn’t work. The fate of the whole world is at stake, so everyone who lives on earth should be included in the pool of candidates.

But then, however would you choose? If all of the leaders of the world gathered together to discuss it, there would just be disagreements — disagreements over which country would lead, disagreements over how to do the polling... While they’re deliberating over all this, the next enemy would arrive and it would be all over. Thus, we took the liberty of choosing all of you. That’s great, isn’t it? You all get to die for the sake of defending the earth. Why, your names will be written into the history books. ...Well, assuming you win, of course.”

“That’s horrible! How could you?!” Anko cried.

Komo, always faint of heart, nearly passed out and had to be held up by Mako.

And in the middle of it all... “The call just came through... I’m next.” The source of this quiet utterance was Tsubasa.



A week has passed.

“The Puppet takes the life of the pilot on every fight” said Maaya and Koyemshi, the two people — or rather one person and one creature? — who handed the Puppet to them suddenly.

It is hard to believe, but if that's true, fighting in this huge robot is also “unbelievable”.

However, the giant robot existed. In fact, Kozue and Kako lost their lives. Two people, died... And Tsubasa heard a voice. It was as if the voice was talking directly to her heart, saying “Tsubasa Hiiragi”.

However, Tsubasa was going on about her day as if nothing happened.

She would get up at 7:20 as always and eat breakfast with her family. However, this time, the aftermath of the battle entered her reality. In the morning news, the headlines read:

“Disaster from a mysterious giant monster! What will the government do!?”

“ 261 10,000 casualties! Rescue efforts continue”

“Miraculous survival! Survivor underneath the rubbles!”

The previous battle made all the headlines in the media. “Disaster from a giant monster” — The name they gave that battle sounded like a movie title.

The vast amount of casualties and missing people are represented by the captions. The number of victims has exceeded ten thousand and there were still over a thousand people missing.

The TV showed the city Kako lived in. On power poles, there was a note that read:

-Hisashi, please contact us-

—Yoko, we are going to evacuate to the countryside-

These messages will probably never reach the recipients for they are not in this world anymore.

A small city shown from 500 meters up in the sky. The city that Kako stepped on and ruined without remorse. But many people lived there, just like the city Tsubasa lived in. They had their life there.

The screen changed, showing the list of missing people in the caption.

There were names she recognized.

— Isao Kako (14) —

His parents must be praying right now and believing in the slim chance that he is still alive.

Knowing that he is dead, and how he died, Tsubasa couldn't help but frown.

The news went on to report on politics. They continued to report on topics related to “monster disasters”. Countries around the world stood

up to show support. The Chinese military rescue team just entered Japan for disaster relief. In the national diet, they were discussing whether the minister of defense was going to resign or not.

Looks like he is being blamed for “the damage spreading due to the delay of attack on the two monsters”. Looks like they want someone to blame Tsubasa thought.

Currently, Japan has the 2nd largest army after China in Asia. Tsubasa was aware of that. But after seeing the powers of the Puppet and the enemy, she knew no matter how hard the humans tried, they didn't stand a chance.

The minister of defense isn't being attacked so aggressively because people want someone to blame. They want to believe, from government officials to citizens, that they could've done something if someone had done the right thing. Tsubasa understood how they felt.

If someone were to say that one day a mysterious monster was going to appear and that there was absolutely nothing the humans could do, nobody would be able to go on about their days anymore. Even if the monster doesn't appear again, Japan as a country would be ruined. That's why they all treated this attack like an earthquake, or some kind of natural disaster so that they can go back to their daily routines.

The same applied for Tsubasa's family. For her parents, that battle was no different from a fire that started somewhere else or an earthquake that struck some place far away.

“Tsubasa, you were in the same class as that girl in Nature School, right?” Her mother was putting jam on the freshly toasted bread when she asked Tsubasa.

She was talking about the news show personnel Tokosumi-san — Anko’s father.

The news on the monsters ended and the program went on to show the latest market rates. Suddenly, there was a frown on her father’s face. The monster disaster took the Nikkei stock average down 5%.

So far, that was the only way the battle affected her family.

Who would imagine that their own daughter was involved in a battle against a monster a few hundred meters tall? It’s kind of funny. Who would believe her? Who would believe that the insane disaster being reported on TV day after day was caused by a friend Tsubasa met at Nature School? And the fact that this will be repeated dozens of times in the future? And that the next battle would be fought by Tsubasa herself, right here in this city?

She holds the fate of the world in her hands. She couldn’t believe that herself.

What can she do? Who can she talk to? She had no clue.

The option Tsubasa was left with was no different from the options other people had. All she could do was to go on about her day like normal. Leave home at 8:20, meet with Moji who lives next door. 15-minute walk to school. Same conversations day in and day out.

They always talked about Nagi, the boy who also lived — or used to live — in their neighbourhood.

“Are you going to see Nagi today Tsubasa?”

“He has a check-up in the afternoon, so probably not.”

“Check-up? Today’s not the regular check-up day. Is he feeling sick again?”

“No, don’t worry. The hospital equipment was being inspected and his periodical check-up date just changed.”

“Ah, I see. I’m relieved to hear that.”

On the way to school, they always talk about Nagi.

Moji, Nagi, and Tsubasa. They all lived next to each other in the community house.

They’re all the only child and visit the same class. It was only natural that they began hanging out with each other. They went to the same kindergarten and elementary school. They all took the same bento-lunch to fieldtrips. They always showed up to see Tsubasa play the piano at her recital.

They were always together, and Tsubasa wanted it to stay that way.

Two boys and one girl.

When the girls got taken out during gym to the video room, she realized they couldn’t always be together.

Sometimes, people would ask her, “Which one are you going to choose?” She noticed that the two boys sometimes looked at her as the “opposite sex” as well.

Someday, she may choose one of them.

Someday, she may marry one of them.

She did think about that. But because she was still in elementary school back then, “someday” was still far away in the distant future.

Even if she was going to end up with one of them in the future, the three of them still could stick together for quite a long time. So she thought.

However, that “quite a long time” ended faster than she thought. She was in 6th grade. Nagi, who was an active athlete, suddenly passed out. Tsubasa heard the news on the way home right after taking a test at cram school.

Nagi passed out.

When she heard that, she remembered saying to herself, *Are you sure it wasn't Moji?*

Unlike Nagi, who was an athlete, Moji liked spending time inside.

He would borrow numerous books from the library and read them until he got a fever from too much reading.

So, when she heard the news, Tsubasa couldn't believe it. She couldn't believe the three of them would grow apart.

Nagi had a heart disease. It was genetic, hard to cure. He needed a heart transplant as fast as possible. If he couldn't get one, he wouldn't live past 20.

So far there was no cure. All he could do was stay still and let his heart rest. Playing sports was out of the question. Even worse, he was told to do refrain from standing up/walking unless it was truly necessary.

So, the morning of the day Nagi passed out was the last time the three of them walked to school together.

A year was about to pass since Nagi was hospitalized in the University hospital in the next town.

Visiting Nagi was a daily routine for Moji and Tsubasa.

"So I'll be able to see him the day after tomorrow. Practice will end early on that day, so I can go with you."

"Nagi won't like that..." Tsubasa told Moji.

"Why?"

"Because you always try to teach him math."

"Wow wow, I'm doing this for Nagi's own good. Once he finds a donor, Nagi can go back to school. But if he ends up quitting anyways because he can't keep up with the studies.. what's the point?"

"You're a nice person, Moji."

"Well, I have my reasons too."

“What?”

“Did you know? Since I started teaching Nagi, my grade has gone up. I do my homework with Nagi too. Teaching someone else is a good way to review.”

“Ah, so that’s why. I thought it was all for Nagi. Maybe I’ll tell on you.”

“No, don’t. That won’t make anyone happy. Anyways, why don’t you join the study session Tsubasa?”

“What! Um... N-no thanks! I mean, two students will be a big burden on you, you know!”

“See, you’re running away from your problems again. That’s why you’re still having difficulties with math and science. Although I can never beat you in language arts.”

“I mean... Seeing all those equations, I can’t handle it.”

“Why, it’s so beautiful... Nagi was saying the same thing. He said he gets sleepy when he looks at numbers. Did you know that Nagi can go to sleep with his eyes open? Once I thought he was thinking for a long time on a simple question, but he was sleeping with a pencil in his hand. Unbelievable.” Moji laughed, and so did Tsubasa.

“But don’t work too hard, ok? Practice too, but you’re helping the student government too, right? Teraoka-sensei was saying you work harder than officers and that you were a number 1 candidate for the president of student council. You have to prepare for the school festival on the day after tomorrow, right?”

“Teraoka-sensei exaggerates too much. The president of my class was absent for a while because of the flu, and I was only taking his place temporarily. It’s not my job to begin with. Besides, I feel bad for Nagi if you’re the only one there, so I’ll figure it out and go with you tomorrow.”

“Really? Thanks.”

Although Moji seems like the non-social type, he cares a lot about his friends. In addition, he can get things done quickly so people ask him to handle various tasks for the team or student council. He was much busier than Tsubasa.

But anytime Tsubasa makes time to visit Nagi, he would always make time and go along.

Needless to say, Moji is Nagi’s good friend. Of course he cares about his friend. But Tsubasa kind of knew the real reason. Maybe Moji himself didn’t even realize it yet.

Moji doesn’t want Tsubasa and Nagi to be alone together.

He wants to prevent us from seeing each other without him.

It was quite obvious. It’s too obvious.

Moji can control his emotions very well, unlike Nagi, who can’t help but show his emotions on his face. Tsubasa sometimes doesn’t understand what he’s thinking, but when it comes to this, Moji was really easy to read.

It’s probably because Moji really cares about me.

That made Tsubasa very happy. But seeing herself as the girl floating between the two of them undecidedly made her feel like a selfish girl, which embarrassed her.

And knowing she can't say yes to Moji made her sad.

Sorry Moji, I'm going to die soon.

Tsubasa remembered one of the scenes from that battle.

Kako died, and the body was teleported away.

Holding down Anko who was screaming at Koyemshi, it was Kanji who broke the silence.

"If we can't undo the contract, can we choose not to ride it... can't we...? ...If we don't move the robot, it won't use our life, which is the energy source, right?"

"You can choose not to fight, that's up to you" Koyemshi replied without hesitation.

"It's up to you, but who else, other than this Puppet will fight the enemy? The national defense army, was it? The army of this country. They got shot down so fast just now. Without the Puppet nobody stands a chance. Are you just going to leave them alone?"

"B-but.. Maybe it doesn't have to be a fighting machine like that..."

"Should we use nukes then? That will result in more damage"

“Then, instead of beating them, why not trap them in ice or do something so they can’t move, just like in monster movies?” Kodama said.

“You guys have video games right? Games usually have a time limit, right? What happens when you can’t beat the game within the given time?” Koyemshi answered Kodama’s question with a question.

Kodama replied weakly, “Well, if it’s a fighting game... The winner will be decided based on the leftover HP. But if it’s not a fighting game...”

“If it isn’t..?”

“Game... over?”

“Exactly. This is a game too. The time limit is 48 hours. If you don’t beat the enemy within 48 hours, you guys lose.”

“Lose? What happens if we... lose?”

The children already had an idea that this “game” they were now a part of, thanks to Koyemshi, was something very sinister. So they thought maybe after 48 hours the robot will explode or something.

But what Koyemshi said so lightly was terrifying beyond their belief.

“The earth will come to an end.”

The children gasped. “End...?”

“Yes. Ah, the same thing will happen if you guys lose. If you think the army will take care of it even if the Puppet gets taken down, you’re wrong.

If you lose, it will all end there. So fight hard, ok? Needless to say, you will end up dead.”

A terrible time to joke — Needless to say, nobody laughed.

“Let me ask you one thing” said Maria in a overly calm voice. Tsubasa knew she was intentionally trying to sound calm to not panic.

“When you say it will end, is it some kind of metaphor? Are you saying that this planet will become inhabitable? Or..” She was trying to find some kind of hope in despair. If they can figure out what happens “after they lose”, maybe there is something they can do.

“No.”

But Koyemshi interrupted her coldly.

“It will end, literally. It will disappear completely, it will be gone. There will be no more earth. Even more, the fact that earth existed in the universe will vanish as well.”

It was an unimaginable answer.

Koyemshi said “The earth will come to an end.”

Literally, it was the end.

“So, you have two choices. First, win the fight, save the world, and die. Second, lose, and die with the world. Maybe it’s not too different, but if you had to choose one, winning might be a better choice, don’t you think?”

“Choose one.. H-how can.. how can you say something like that..” Mako replied. Her face was completely white.

“I don’t know. What can I do. These are the rules. The young lady and I were only sent here to explain the rules.”

“Then who made these rules?”

Maria was still trying to act strong.

Maaya answered her question. “Who knows, we don’t even know. God, maybe.”

“What! How can this happen! God wouldn’t do this! This has to be the work of the devil...!” Maria disagreed.

That was when Tsubasa felt, what Maria was feeling, for the first time. It was anger.

“Then, that devil is our god.” It was deep anger.

“Tsubasa, what’s wrong?” Tsubasa was taken back to reality by Moji’s voice.

I probably had a scary look on my face.

“Are you that worried about Nagi?”

He thinks I was thinking about Nagi. After all, what else could I be thinking about, right?

“It’s okay. I’m sure he’ll be okay. We just need to wait a little longer. Organ transplant technology is getting better every year with new laws

being made. Few years ago, kids our age couldn't get organ transplants, but now it's different. Even better, someone might invent a cure tomorrow that won't require a transplant at all." He wasn't just saying that.

He explained his claims with reason. He was right. What they need is time.

There are numerous ways Nagi can be saved. But that's only if this world is still here.

"You're right." While nodding, Tsubasa made a decision.

Yes, that was the moment she decided, *I am going to fight*.

"So" Tsubasa remembered that cold voice.

"What do you plan to do? Are you going to fight?" It was Ushiro's voice.

It was after the battle ended. Ushiro asked the question while Tsubasa was taken aback hearing the "rules".

"Are you going to fight and die for us, or are you going to run away and bring others down with you? Tell us that. I have plans of my own." He sounded like he didn't care about Tsubasa dying.

"You!" Waku snapped at his attitude.

But Ushiro remained calm. "What? Those are the rules, right? It's already decided. Getting emotional won't do us any good."

So Tsubasa replied. "I'm going to fight".

Tsubasa stood right in front of Ushiro, glaring into his eyes.

I wonder how long it's been.

Ushiro looked away as if to say, that's stupid.

Tsubasa went on. "There are people I want to protect" She was thinking about her parents, friends from school, Moji, and Nagi.

The small bell rang. 5 more minutes until school started. Looks like they were walking slower than usual from all the thinking.

"Sorry! Let's hurry" Tsubasa tried to sound as energetic as possible and told Moji.

I am going to fight. I can do it. Not just Nagi, Moji too. They will do incredible things in the future.

I really think so. I have no idea how Moji will turn out, and it's a shame I won't be able to witness it, but I cannot lose him. So I am going to fight. I can do it.

-Two days later.

Tsubasa woke up. She looked at her clock. It was 3 am. It was still dark outside.

I am going to fight. Death doesn't scare me. She told herself many times. She made a decision —or so she thought.

The body can't lie. Every day since that day, she couldn't sleep well. She would go on to spend the rest of the time until her "regular time to wake up" on her bed, awake.

How many day has it been? The more she tries to go on about her day like normal, the harder it gets.

Of course it's scary to die.

Her period didn't even come when it was supposed to. "I'm going to die-" She told herself this many times, quietly.

How many days until the next battle? Kozue's fight was two weeks after the end of Nature School. Then Kako's fight followed about two weeks later.

Then, it was her turn to fight in two weeks or so. But there was no way to be sure. Those instances could've been just a coincidence.

It might be tomorrow, or even right now. I might die tomorrow. Tsubasa imagined what it would be like to die.

The existence that is "me" will disappear and become nothing.

-Nothing. Yes, I am thinking about nothingness right now. A space with nothing, all white. But that is not nothing, because there is "me" who is thinking about "nothingness". This won't be the case with real "nothingness" or "death". Because I won't be there. It's scary. It's terrifying.

Then Tsubasa remembered about Nagi, whom she's been a friend with since they were young, the one who is struggling with a heart condition. Nagi has been fighting with such fear since he was in elementary school.

Up until now, Moji and I were trying our best to put ourselves in his shoes, like when we went to visit him at the hospital. If we look too worried, Nagi may get worried too, so we acted as energetic as possible. But now that I think about it, what good was that? I was so childish. I was so insensitive. Just in a few days after I learned about my death, I was exhausted. How did Nagi spend a year like this? Did he fight against such fear for a whole year? I had no idea how Nagi felt, thought Tsubasa.

She once wrote "I want to be as nice as possible to Nagi, who may die tomorrow from a heart condition" in her essay during 6th grade. She wanted to go back in time and kill herself for writing that.

"Nagi and I". She got the 2nd prize in the essay contest hosted by the prefecture.

Give me a break. So stupid. How arrogant I was. Did I really think I knew how Nagi felt? Did I really think I could ease his pain? Maybe instead of easing his pain, I may have been making it worse.

Then morning came. Morning. 7:10.

It's not that she wakes up at this time every day. It's just late enough to not worry her parents. A regular morning.

How many more of this do I have left? How many more mornings can I enjoy?

You could tell from the face in the mirror she wasn't getting enough sleep. The bottom of her eyes was black. She told her parents it was because she had a test soon, but that excuse wouldn't last forever.

Will it hold up until I die? A horrible joke. She struggled to put on foundation and concealer on her black spots under her eyes.

Make up, I thought it would be much later. My first makeup experience was in the classroom. A friend got worried and let me use her set. My first-. Much later-.

The future. Such a vague word. But now that I think about it, there were many things I wanted to try. But I'm going to die without being able to try any of them. Tears dripped down her cheeks.

Later that day, scratching her eyes and getting through a day of class, Tsubasa went to Nagi's hospital afterschool.

Moji couldn't cancel his plans after all.

She knew Moji wouldn't like Tsubasa seeing Nagi by herself. But she wasn't sure how many times she would be able to see Nagi. Furthermore, she won't be around to satisfy Moji's feelings. So she chose Nagi over Moji. That's what she wanted Moji to think too. She opened Nagi's door. A white room.

Before his illness, he had brown skin from all the tan he got, but now his skin was whiter than Tsubasa's.

There was a photo on the side table. It was Tsubasa, Nagi, and Moji. Tsubasa wearing a sailor uniform and the other two wearing uniforms

for boys. But the background was this hospital room. They took this on the first day of junior-high. Since then, Nagi never wore his school uniform.

What does he think about every day looking at this picture? Wiping away her curiosity, she put on a smile on her face and started to arrange the fruits she brought as a get-well wish.

This may be the last time she sees him. So she wanted it to be as fun as possible. For herself, and for Nagi. That's what Tsubasa was thinking about.

But the first thing Nagi said when he saw Tsubasa was, "What's wrong, Tsubasa? You look tired, is everything ok?"

I am so bad at this. If it were Moji, I could get through it without raising any suspicions. Tsubasa tried her best to cover it up.

"Ah, yeah. Well, that recent news"

"What?"

"That.. um.. black monster" — *crap*, thought Tsubasa. She could've just said something didn't go well at school. Why did I bring up the Puppet?

"Ah, I saw on TV. It was intense. That happened for real right? I thought it was some kind of movie —. No, wait. Godzilla is only 100m tall. That thing was at least 500m tall, at least that's what they said on the news. Its head was above the clouds."

Tsubasa had no choice but to keep talking about it. She didn't want to though.

She got tempted to tell him everything. She might break down crying in front of Nagi.

“Y.. yeah. My friend was in that town. Someone I met at Nature School —”

“Are they... ok?”

“One of them is ok. But the other one is missing... Probably...”

“I see... Sorry... I'm sorry Tsubasa...”

“Huh?”

“When I was watching it on TV, I saw the home video footage many times. I thought it was kind of cool because it looked like a movie or some kind of anime. But people died right?”

“No don't —”

“I wish I had died instead of him..”

“What—?”

“I should've died for him instead. I don't have many years to go anyways. So I wish I could use my life for someone else's wellbeing.”

“No...”

“In the beginning, right after I got the illness, I prayed every day that a donor would pop up. But that wasn’t praying. I was cursing others. I was hoping someone would die, every day. But even if I could get a transplant, I’d still need to take medication and suffer from the side effects. I won’t be able to do any good for the world. Maybe I should just die quickly. See, I used to play sports. I’ve been a vegetable for a year, but my other organs are pretty healthy. If I die now, it may help others. I mean, just like the doctor says, there is a possibility I may find a full match donor. In that case, there’s no need to take medication because my body won’t resist it. No need to suffer from the side effects either with a full match donor. But what are the chances of someone with a heart like that dying in the near future? Slim to none. So I thought the best thing I could do now is to die quickly”

“Stop!” She couldn’t hold it in any longer. “Please! Don’t say that! I am happy just seeing you alive!”

“Thank you. But it’s okay. I’m not scared of death anymore. I gave up, it’s fate...”

Silence.

“Tsubasa, I like you a lot.”

And he confesses his love for her.

“But you like Moji, right?”

“I like both of you —”

“No, I mean as a man and a woman. But with me around, you can’t go out with Moji. Tsubasa, remember what you said to me? ,Don’t worry, I’ll be here until you get better. Until then, I won’t choose someone specific and go out with them’.”

I did say that. I was probably thinking about Nagi. But that’s not all. It was also to protect myself. I couldn’t choose between Nagi and Moji. I was a selfish girl like that.

“So you can forget about that promise. I don’t want to get in your way. I want you to be happy.

Take good care of Moji —”

Tsubasa understood. She can’t help it.

Not scared to die? That’s a lie.

Now that she is in the same shoes as Nagi, she gets it. She was about to cry. Her vision started to get blurry. She was about to spill everything, so all she could do was keep crying.

At the same time. In the waiting room of the hospital Nagi was in, there was Moji. He had a cup of coffee in his hands. It was half empty and cold.

In his bag was an application for the school festival budget. Normally the accountant will handle this, but because people realized he was really good with numbers, he was given the responsibility, even though he was in his 1st year. It wasn’t much work, but if he tried to finish it first, he wouldn’t make it to Nagi’s visiting hours.

He just didn't like the idea of Tsubasa visiting Nagi alone. He told others that he would finish this at home and snuck out. But, just as he was about to enter Nagi's room, he heard, "Tsubasa, I like you a lot".

He couldn't stay there.

I see, this was what I was afraid of. Moji finally realized.

Needless to say, he knew how Nagi felt, and Tsubasa too. Moji's been with them since elementary school. Of course he knew. Yes.

Nagi was his rival over Tsubasa.

When Nagi got sick, somewhere inside I was happy, knowing I would be able to get Tsubasa.

But knowing Tsubasa, he knew she wouldn't choose him over Nagi who had the advantage.

Tsubasa will never leave Nagi's side as long as he's alive. Thinking about Nagi, she would never go out with me. And even if Nagi dies, she'll never choose me, thinking about Nagi who passed away. Moji thought to himself.

The three of us were together for too long. Nagi and I were a set. But then, Tsubasa should be left with only two choices. Nagi, or neither —. Stop it.

Moji told himself.

He had this thought many times thinking about Tsubasa. He knew where this was going. The only way — a terrible way — to get Tsubasa was —

The radio in the lounge was talking about the “monster disaster” like yesterday. Every day, the count for missing people decreases and the death count increases. In midst of that, an unrelated news caught his attention.

“The police arrested Kazutaka Murai (32) on the count of murder. According to the police, he is under investigation for the murder of Tadashi Yanagisawa, an employee who lives in the same city, on the day of the monster disaster. At the time the death of Mr. Yanagisawa was thought to be a result of the monster disaster, but there were many strange scars and wounds on his body and the police were looking into his death.”

Looks like someone who tried to blame a murder on the monster disaster got arrested. That's not a bad idea. I mean, over ten thousand people died. They say there aren't enough crematoriums at the moment.

They don't have time to investigate every death. But this guy got caught because he used a knife. And unfortunately for him, the body didn't get crushed by the buildings. No matter how big the disaster is, if there is a stab wound, people will notice. Honestly, he was —

“-Stupid, just plain stupid.”

He realized there was a girl sitting next to him. She had shining black hair in pigtails. She was wearing a uniform from the same school. But he didn't recognize her. With her looks, if he saw her he would remember.

“He should’ve used a rock or something instead of a knife. I mean, right? Then people would’ve assumed he got killed by a brick that flew by, and nobody would’ve realized.”

— It was as if she read Moji’s mind.

“Scary. Have we met somewhere before?”

„You’re quite famous in school Moji. You always rank within the top 10 in standardized testing in the prefecture. You get the best grades in class. You’re a genius that comes by once every 10 years.”

“Are you here to visit someone?”

“Yes, my grandmother. But my mom is talking with her in private. Probably about her will. Adults have so much to worry about. They have to hide so many things” She sighed loudly. “So I was bored. Can you pass the time with me? Just until my mom gets back here?”

“Sure. What’s your name?”

“I’m Mayako Makishima. Call me Maaya. Class number 2.”

“So you’re in the same class as Tsubasa. Do you know her?”

“Yes, very well. So, how would you do it?”

“What?”

“If you were to kill someone in midst of the monster disaster.”

“Pretty violent for a casual chat. Well, let’s see. — I don’t I need to do anything directly. Perhaps do something to make them immobile, and leave them in a dangerous location?”

Like putting them to sleep using a pill or locking them in a room —”

“Or if the person can’t evacuate by themselves, you won’t even need to do that.”

“True. Even if someone found out, you won’t be penalized. I mean, if you tried to save someone who can’t walk in such a situation, you risk dying too.. Do you know about the ‘Plank of Carneades’?”

“Yes. After the ship sank, a man was holding onto a piece of wood. Then another man appeared to grab on to the plank as well, but it was too small to hold two grown men. So the man kicked off the man who came and he drowned to death. He survived because of what he did. He was tried in court for this, but he was found innocent. A happy ending, right..

„You can’t blame someone for sacrificing someone else to save their own life.” said Maaya. She sounded like she was telling herself that. “Or if only one person can get the board, you can knock down others at all costs, right?”

“That may be going too far. But that’s scary. If the monster appeared near this hospital, what will happen? Will the people who are hospitalized be able to evacuate?”

“They’ll be okay” said the girl with confidence.

“The monster won’t come to this town.”



“True... It’s pretty rare. In fact, I hope that never happens again.”

Then the girl responded sharply to Moji’s response. “The monster will appear in your town. And in few days.”

“What?”

“So if you want to kill someone in this hospital, you better invite them to your town first.” she sounded so confident, Moji started to get suspicious.

“What are you—?”

“Just joking. You surprised?”

“That’s not funny. That’s too far”

“Sorry. But sometimes, what we joke about happens for real.

So I just said it just in case you don’t regret it.”

“Thanks. But I’m ok. I don’t have anyone I want to kill—”

“That’s unfortunate. But are you sure? Everyone has somebody they want to kill right? I think you should be honest with yourself.”

Who is this girl? It’s like she knows what I’m thinking.

“Thanks, but I’m sure” —*A lie. That thought I just had. A horrible way to get Tsubasa. Death of Nagi that isn’t caused by disease. Something that may occur to either one of us. Then, I can get on the same ground as Nagi. Nagi dies from something other than his illness. Then, I can get Tsubasa. For instance—yes. The mysterious monster strikes the town. What a stupid thought. The monster appearing here? What are the*

chances of that? Or maybe a big earthquake will strike the hospital and everyone gets crushed because the structure of the hospital had some missing parts. That has a better chance of happening. But if —. Moji was unlucky in the sense that he could not stop thinking.

A normal person would stop thinking here, but his brain just kept connecting ideas regardless of his will.

But if the monster were to appear here, I need to make Nagi go back home. He has been doing better these days. If he wants to go home temporarily, the hospital will probably let him. But how? Ah, it's almost that day... Last year we couldn't do it because he got hospitalized, but maybe we can do it this year. Yes. Kill Nagi? No. Not that. I want Nagi to enjoy himself as much as possible. So that he doesn't regret anything when the unthinkable happens.

“Moji!” Unfortunately, Moji’s brain had already drafted a plan before Tsubasa interrupted its thought process. A plan to make Nagi return home.

“Ah, you were here...”

“Yeah...” Tsubasa’s eyes were red.

What happened? And she's acting a bit strange. But considering what he heard from outside the room, it's quite obvious.

I can't just ask her. Moji decided to act oblivious. Finishing the cold coffee, he lied.

“Club activity ended faster than I thought so I came by but the visiting hours were over. So I was chatting with her.”

“Her?”

“Yeah. She said she was in the same class as you Tsubasa.”

“She went home?”

“Huh?” Moji turned around. That girl he was just talking to was gone. It was as if she was never there to begin with.

—The day finally came.

On the way back from school. Lit up by the red sun disappearing in the horizon, the black monster, the Puppet that uses Tsubasa’s life as energy appeared. And so did the enemy.

The enemy, which appeared from nowhere like always, looked stranger than usual. It was floating in the air. For some reason, it’s floating and staying perfectly still. And there were two of them. One was narrow like an “Arrow”. The other one took shape of a pentagon that looked like a baseball base. Perhaps a “Shield”.

Looking up at the enemy, Tsubasa realized this was the last day for her. But she was thinking about Nagi and Moji. Fortunately, both Nagi and Moji were at the hospital in a different town. They had “something to talk about as men”.

But since the Puppet is 500m tall, they may not be so safe after all.

But if I fight properly, I can protect them both. I have to win to do that. she told herself.

Cars were honking everywhere. The quiet town was in chaos. People were panicking, trying to evacuate.

“Ready to die?” someone said behind her.

Tsubasa wasn’t startled. She knew it was coming. She turned around.

Maaya and Koyemshi.

Tsubasa replied. “Yes. I’m going to fight.”

“Tsubasa!” Her teammates welcome Tsubasa as she gets transferred to the cockpit.

Everyone looked worried.

“Don’t worry...” said Tsubasa with the best smile she can muster.

“I have people I want to protect” she said as she looked around.

Some looked away.

Some looked back and nodded.

Some already had red eyes.

Lastly her eyes met with Ushiro.

“Don’t worry, I’m going to fight. But let me ask you one thing, what are you going to do? Do you have someone you want to protect?”

“None of your business...” Ushiro’s attitude appeared childish to Tsubasa.

She sat down.

She stared at the enemy in front of her. Arrow and Shield. „Contradiction“.

“There are two enemies this time?”

“No, that’s one enemy. There’s only one weak point. I think one of them remotely controls the other. It’s a rare type” said Koyemshi.

“I see. If possible I want to wait until everyone evacuates, is that possible?”

“It’s up to the enemy. I wonder if it will wait.” Before Koyemshi finished, the Arrow started to move. It came at Tsubasa at unimaginable speed.

“Come on, wait just a bit!”

Screaming, Tsubasa jumped back to avoid the attack. She stepped on and crushed buildings, cars, and people. But that didn’t stop her. She was “used to seeing that”. If she hesitates, the damage will increase. The battle began.

The Arrow attacked and the Shield blocked and created diversions. That was how the “Contradiction” fought.

The Arrow attacked with speed every time the Puppet stalled. It was too much to take even if the Puppet swung its arms. All it could do was avoid it.

Whenever it tried to shoot it off with laser, the Shield would block it. It was as strong as it looked.

Firing at it didn't yield much damage. But if it tried to strike the Shield directly, the Shield would fire laser beams randomly and back up. Then the Arrow would come flying in no time. The fight was in a deadlock. Perhaps the Puppet was at a slight disadvantage.

Seeing the Puppet avoid various attacks, the enemy changed its strategy. Now it started to attack simultaneously with laser from the Shield and speed attack from the Arrow.

If the Puppet avoids the laser, it will get struck by the Arrow, and if it tried to avoid the arrow, it gets hit by the laser. It was a sinister attack.

The Shield was about half the size of the Puppet. If struck, the Puppet probably won't be okay. Then, the only thing the Puppet can do is to get hit by the laser on purpose. Even though it only shaves off the surface slightly, what would happen when it gets repeated numerous times?

The two fighters went on and on like this.

Then something changed when the laser that ricocheted off of the Puppet's armor struck the three houses that belonged to Tsubasa and her friends.

Nagi and Tsubasa's houses were gone completely. Moji's house was half gone.

“Argh!” Tsubasa frowned, but she told herself, *It’s okay. Nobody is at home. It’s sad to see her house with personal memories disappear, but houses can be rebuilt.*

But then.

Tsubasa suddenly noticed there were two people in the half broken house. She didn’t actually see it, but she knew it somehow. She knew there were two lives there. The ability to detect life, this was one of the abilities that the Puppet gave to the pilot. But Tsubasa didn’t have time to doubt this. Because the two lives there were people she knew very well, and people that shouldn’t be there.

The screen opened and it zoomed in on the image. From the cracks of the roof, there they were, Nagi and Moji.

Moji had set up a small surprise party. If Tsubasa had been in a normal state of mind, she would’ve remembered. Today was a special day for the three of them.

Today was the day Tsubasa and the other families moved here. Last year, the celebration was put on hold because Nagi got hospitalized. But until then, they held small parties at Moji’s house every year.

Moji invited Nagi back home temporarily to hold the annual party with the trio. Then, Nagi and Tsubasa, who has been feeling under the weather recently for some reason, would feel better.

Regardless of what lead to this idea, when he thought of this plan, he intended no harm what so ever. This was the same even when the

monster appeared. Nagi and Moji were still in the house, simply because Moji thought it would be the safest thing to do to stay in the house. The street in front of their houses was crowded to begin with. It got packed with people trying to evacuate immediately. If Moji stepped out with Nagi who couldn't walk well, they would've been crushed by the crowd. Unless they had a car or something, they wouldn't be able to avoid the monster on foot. After all, it was a 500m tall monster. If he wanted, Moji could've abandoned Nagi and made a run for it. But Moji didn't do it. Up until that decisive moment, Moji was willing to protect Nagi.

In fact, Moji was right. Tsubasa, who was in control of one of the "monsters" tried to avoid their houses unconsciously. The three houses were the safest location in the town that was chosen as the battlefield.

But Tsubasa could not predict how the enemy laser would ricochet. And that moment was here. The laser that reflected off from the Puppet's armor took down half of the house that the two were in.

At first Moji couldn't understand what happened. A flash of light and a loud noise, followed by a big shock. His thought stopped. Then he realized, he was on the floor.

He woke up in the rubble. There was sand in his mouth. He could see the sky. And a black devil-like shadow. He collected his thoughts. He checked himself. Fortunately, he didn't seem to be seriously hurt. Just a few scratches.

Then he suddenly remembered about his friend. Groaning sound. There he was, Nagi, holding his chest under rubbles. The sudden attack on the house by the monster was strong enough to cause a heart attack.

“Argh...”

Then Moji remembered something. Was it because of confusion caused by a sudden accident? Maybe the huge black monster in front of him reminded him of that girl at the hospital with the black hair.

Moji's thoughts. *,No need to do the dirty work directly. Just immobilize the person and leave them in a dangerous location. Or if the person can't evacuate by himself or herself, it's even easier. Even if someone finds out, you can't be tried.*

Do you know about the 'Plank of Carneades'? If only one of you can hold onto the plank, you can knock off the rival at all costs.

Moji looked at his feet. He didn't see a friend he should save. It was an enemy of love he had to get rid of. Holding his heart with his left hand, Nagi took out his medications with his right hand. Moji stepped on that hand.

“Agh...! Moji...”

Moji suppressed his emotions. So that he could kill his friend.

I need Tsubasa.

“Sorry Nagi.” It sounded like he was apologizing for being late.

“It's a perfect opportunity. The town is in panic because of the monsters. A sick child gets a heart attack seeing all this happen and dies. Nobody would doubt that” Words came out smoothly as if he had prepared those lines beforehand. He had many opportunities up until now.

Why didn't I do it faster? Now that I think about it, it's kind of weird.

“Moji...”

“Tsubasa is a nice girl. If you're alive, she won't be able to be free because of you. So die for Tsubasa, please. Sorry Nagi.” He took away the pill case from his left hand.

Then Moji made a run for it. He never turned back. Moji had committed the perfect crime. In fact, Nagi was later counted among the thousands of casualties in the “second monster disaster” and buried. The only witness was the “monster”. Actually, to be more precise, it was Tsubasa who was in that monster, and the twelve children plus one creature.

“Koyemshi! Send me there!” Seeing the scene, Waku screamed.

“Ah, fine... It's not my fault if you get crushed.”

“Shut up, hurry up!”

“I'm coming too!” Maria followed.

With Koyemshi, the two of them got transferred to Moji's house. Holding Nagi, they went back to the cockpit. Maria, who has experience, performs first aid. Waku kept on massaging his heart.

But—

“Moji... Th... Thank you...” All they could do was listen to his last words. His heart had completely stopped beating.

“Argh! Why!” A loud bang and shock erased Waku's scream.

The Puppet got struck clean by the Shield. The huge monster fell down. The right arm was gone from the shoulders.

Waku looked at Tsubasa.

Standing still, Tsubasa was crying.

“...Why..? Moji... Why...” Tsubasa was completely out of commission.

Tsubasa, fight. Waku was about to say this, and stopped.

Who can blame her? The boy she was trying to save just killed another boy she was fighting for. What reason does Tsubasa have to fight now? What reason does she have to protect a world like that? Who can command her to fight?

Then, suddenly—

“I-it’s still beating!” screamed Kirie.

“Tsubasa, his heart is still beating. We still have time! Hurry, take down the enemy! We need to take him to the hospital!”

—This was a lie. But what else would’ve made Tsubasa continue fighting?

The Puppet avoided the Arrow’s blow.

“Nagi! Stay with us!” Tsubasa screamed.

The battle resumed. But not much changed. All the Puppet could do was to avoid attacks from the Arrow.

“Koyemshi! Can you detach the cockpit from the Puppet?!” Everyone wondered why she asked that.

“Yes. All you need to do is think about it, and you’ll figure it out” said Koyemshi calmly.

Tsubasa dodged multiple blows from the Arrow.

“Everyone, hold on tight!” she screamed suddenly.

The Arrow came at them from the front. But Tsubasa didn’t move. Everyone was afraid that she had given up out of desperation.

“Tsubasa! Dodge!”

“What are you doing?!”

“Now!” Tsubasa screamed as people criticized her.

Suddenly the front view got higher.

“The cockpit of the Puppet has been dethatched!” Waku got the idea.

Then, right below, the Arrow speared through the main body of the Puppet. Its explosive power. It was so powerful, it didn’t slow down a bit even after penetrating the Puppet.

Then they saw what was in front of the Arrow. — Shield.

Then the two collided.

The sharp tip of the Arrow crushed the Puppet and the Shield.

Then—Impact. The cockpit landed on the ground. Buildings and houses got crushed beneath, raising a cloud of dust.

Then, when the clouds disappeared, they finally saw the Puppet from ground level. Actually, they saw the Puppet and the Shield, both penetrated by the Arrow.

The Puppet too, the Shield, the Arrow, none of them moved at all. They stood there like tombstones.

“Did... we win?”

“Nicely done. You crushed the enemy’s weak point. You guys win” Koyemshi replied.

“Koyemshi! Hurry! We need to take Nagi to the hospital!” screamed Tsubasa.

She screamed.

Waku couldn’t look straight into her eyes.

“Tsubasa... I’m sorry...” said Kirie in a hoarse voice.

Tsubasa realized the truth. That Nagi was no longer alive.

“Ah... I’m so... Why am I so gullible...?”

“Tsubasa...”

“It’s okay... Waku, you guys have someone to protect... I don’t blame you...” Tsubasa replied and held Nagi’s corpse. It was as if she was



trying to warm him up with her body temperature because he was slowly but surely losing body temperature.

“Hey... Nagi... What did I fight for...” Nagi, or what used to be Nagi, did not respond. And her teammates around her couldn’t say anything either.

Tsubasa kissed Nagi on his cold lips. And she stayed like that for quite a long time.

“Tsubasa...” Waku called her name to break the silence.

Tsubasa didn’t respond.

A few days later.

A group funeral was being held in the town where the battle took place.

The previous area where the battle erupted was still in recovery. From volunteers to supplies, there was a shortage on everything. The fire wasn’t completely out yet. Some districts still had smoke coming out.

In midst of all this, a funeral was being held for those who were lost in the disaster, including Tsubasa and Nagi. Major public facilities have been destroyed, so the funeral was being held in an empty land under the blue sky. The large vehicles and the news choppers flying in the sky made it hard to hear the voices reciting the sutra. But you could still hear the sound of people crying.

There were a few hundred of them. Waku was one of them. Then, after the funeral, he saw a familiar face.

Moji.

Tsubasa's friend. Tsubasa's loved one. And the one who betrayed Tsubasa. It wasn't why he came here. He wanted to see Tsubasa and Nagi for the last time.

But as soon as he saw his face, Waku could not resist.

He ran to catch Moji, who was walking towards the temporary tents weakly. Grabbing his shoulders, he pulled him out of the crowd.

He grabbed his collar. "Tsubasa did it for you! For you!.." But Waku couldn't go on, because there was no response. He was alive, but his eyes weren't looking at Waku. It didn't seem like he was looking at anything at all. His eyes were blurry and foggy.

Even with Waku shaking him, Moji didn't respond in any way. His neck just shook like a broken doll.

Back then, the strong will he showed when he abandoned his friend during the battle was gone. He was just standing there, breathing.

It looked like he wasn't eating much either. He looked skinnier than usual. He looked like he didn't know why he was there. If he would have played the villain, maybe Waku could've been saved. If he already had a new girlfriend even though it was only a week since the incident, and acted to cry during the funeral then went on a date afterwards, he could've struck him with his fists. He could've avenged Tsubasa's death. But it was really hard for him to accept. He had no choice. Moji had paid for his actions.

He was already dead.

He was an empty shell. So there was nothing Waku could do. All he could do was shake an empty boy by the collar and repeat himself, “Why... Why...”

Then Waku heard a voice. A voice that spoke directly to his heart.

A voice that called his name — Takashi Waku -.

Commentary by Mohiro Kitoh

Hi, this is Mohiro Kitoh, the creator of the original work.

This may come as a surprise, but I'm just going to come straight out and say it — I hate multi-ending style RPG and adventure games.

I'm talking about those games that have so-called 'forks in the road', where you make choices that effect how the story turns out.

Here we are, working our asses off day after day trying to narrow down a bunch of possible storylines to find the best one, only to have some guy come along and throw them all together and present the result as a single product.

Can you see why this would really piss me off?

For the moment, let's leave to one side the fact that this creates all kinds of extra work, like making all those different routes...

And then there's all the spin-offs into different media types...

Anime, live-action, movies, manga, novels — these are all presentations of one of the various routes from the original story. Despite all the hardships that the creator has gone through in choosing the storyline that they considered best at the time, a completely different story gets put out for the world to see.

For the writer, this means one of two things occurs. Either the storyline that gets put out is inferior to the one you created, causing you to hold your head in your hands and bang your fists on the table screaming "WHY DID THEY DO THAT?!" Or, the storyline that gets put out is better than the one you created, causing you to get pissed off at your own incompetence.

Ok, so getting back to THIS work — the one I'm supposed to be talking about. Here's what I thought when I read it...

“They’ve put Kozue’s and Nagi’s storylines together!!”

“I never thought of this gag...”

“So that’s what this character was thinking when they were doing that... I get it now...”

“So the kids first game of the season was an away game, huh? I wonder how this’ll turn out...”

“I never thought of this gag...”

“They gave Kako some disclosure material... Interesting...”

“Poor Kako! He even lost the privilege of receiving the final blow from that kid he liked...”

“So that’s what this character was thinking when they were doing that... I get it now...”

“Over-the-knee socks, huh? Awesome...”

“Yeah, the girl in the wheelchair was the basis of it all! Come to think of it, Clara Sesemann¹...”

“So, they went for pigtails. I get it. But what about Takkong²?”

(Remainder omitted)

Footnotes:

1: Clara “Klara” Sesemann is a character from the series “Alps no Shoujo Heidi” who sits in a wheelchair.

2: Giant monster from the series “Return of Ultraman”. Takkong is having a fight with another giant monster named Zazahn smashing Tokyo Bay and it is later fighting Ultraman.